Young Abstract Painters: Right On!

by DORE ASHTON

A cautionary forward: Anyone writing about young abstract painters today is writing about what has surfaced, and the mechanics of surfacing must be kept in mind at all times. With an accelerated rate of consumption haunting the society (all those sinister T.V. admonishments not to aid inflation by consuming more than you need), the situation of the arts is not unaffected. Art is consumed just as avidly as any other commodity, and its purveyors resort to more and more frantic publicaritarian methods to keep up with the times.

There are any number of signs that the art to which we gain access through gallery and museum exhibitions is a victim of consumer-society techniques. For one thing, techniques of exploitation have been perfected with the literally spectacular entry of big business in the exhibition world. Those pros who promote tobacco or plastics know how to get coverage. All they need is a package. If some dozen men and women seem to be doing similar work, put them together with a few well chosen words and a good label, and you have this year's movement. Entrepreneurs in museums and galleries recognize the merits of these sophisticated techniques. The 1960s have been kind to trendmakers who know how to satisfy the eternal hunger of the blue cosmopolite.

They have also been kind to just about anyone connected with the centers of art power. With a tempo that has never been paralleled, articles, exhibitions and even books have been issued confirming the successive choices of this well-oiled art commodity machine. There is a long history of centralization in the arts (probably unavoidable) and New York has a corner on the market. As long ago as the Second World War, there were complaints from responsible critics that the new “traveling” exhibitions that visited culture upon the hinterlands were the reflection of the taste of a very few, very powerful nabobs in New York. Since then, traveling exhibitions have been abetted considerably by traveling magazines and television specials, all reinforcing the rapid overturn in trends or, at least, in labels.

How all this affects the young artist is a matter for speculation. Writing in 1962, Leo Steinberg remarked about the rapid domestication of the outrageous, noting that “at the present rate of taste adaptation, it takes about seven years for a young artist with a streak of wildness in him to turn from enfant terrible into elder statesman.” Probably by this time, the seven years can be condensed even more—a prospect the implications of which are certainly not lost on the new young artist. Moreover, he is subject to the youtheult pressures so obvious in this society. His equivocal elders have told him that there is a place in the sun for him, but the sun shifts dangerously fast. Some have encouraged him to take the ironies of Duchamp seriously. (I'm an artist if I say so.) And lately, even the citadels of deep knowledge— the colleges— have bowed to the times (especially to the economies of the times) and advertise, as does the California Institute if I say so. And lately, even the citadels of deep knowledge an artist. This naturally doesn’t give a student much time to be a student. He has to find his “style” or sink.

And the universities and colleges are where the majority of young artist begin these days. Where once a painter surveyed his immediate past with some psychological distancing—there is a big difference, after all, between reading delayed issues of Cahiers d'Art from far across the sea, and picking up the latest Artforum—now he is brought up very close through ever-increasing art departments, seminars, term papers, research, bibliographies, personal appearances of the stars, and traveling exhibitions. Like any modern painter, he needs to know the history of modern art. But the history of the past decade is an almost illegible text of exclamation points; constant interruptions in the normally slow, steady flow of painterly ideas; constant distinctions made where few really exist.
A burgeoning artist of the 1960s was exposed, for instance, to some dozen variations on "new" ideas. It began with a concerted drive to place Barnett Newman high on the scale of innovation, liberating the idea of "color fields" as "stlye." At the same time, the iconic black paintings of Reinhardt were situated, in order to re-shape the vision of geometric painting and mysticism to suit the needs of the day. From this issued countless variations. The announcement made by Clement Greenberg that the true advanced painting was conceptual, and that "post-painterly abstraction" was the one true faith, had a big impact. There was also Pop art, Op art, Systematic painting, Cool Art, Minimal Art, Anti-Illusion art, and I suppose many more that slip my mind for the moment. Not a winter passed without there being some museum "theme" show, purporting to bring forward the very latest, and of course, the very best progressive steps in this historical step-ladder on which everyone seems to be ascending.

The young painters who summoned up the courage to be painters in the face of this bewildering pattern of purposeful organizing and extensive commentary deserve credit. It is not easy to thread your way through it all. While a young painter is often treated like a race horse (so-and-so is out of Louis, out of Poons, out of Newman, out of Reinhardt), he can yet assert his downright hunger for paint and canvas. He can, and does, insist that there is still a lot to be said for the mysteries of transformation. Although many younger painters seem to be grabbing wildly from the growing board of recent instant-art-history,
Donald Kaufman, Rotation (1968), acrylic on canvas, 108" x 144". Richard Feigen Gallery.

they demonstrate real verve and undeniable sincerity in their attack on the two-dimensional surface and the demands it makes upon the imagination. The primordial need for illusion—that which exists mainly in the terra incognita of the imagination—is always there.

With this in mind, it is not difficult to see merit in the work of the newest group to be thrust to the fore, primarily in the new downtown galleries, and in the Whitney Annual. They are, for the most part, painters in their middle to late twenties, with a few senior colleagues in their late thirties. They are characterized by their ambitious dealers as "lyrical abstractionists" with a difference; the difference of which remains undisclosed. Their work often seems hasty, unedited, urgently styled to meet the current appetites, and indiscriminately eclectic. They go in for thinness, not only in the literal sense, but also in the psychological sense. Since they often produce paintings in groups around single ideas, if one painting doesn't come off, the next one will. There is a devil-may-care ebullience in evidence which for the very young is salubrious and for the less young, embarrassing. In many ways the younger painters seem to be resurrecting the Abstract Expressionist ethic, which regarded a painting as anything you could make it provided it was a sincere expression of feeling. The absolute freedom demanded by the generation of Still, Rothko, de Kooning, et al has been pre-empted by the younger artist in order to bring together the seemingly anti-

thetic notions of painting as flat and sharp and spare, and painting as stressed and loose and profuse.

A less-young figure such as Darby Bunnard, who once chided de Kooning for his dripping and brushing mannerisms, and whose own work of just a few years back had neat edges and rather sharply defined, almost geometric shapes, has slowly moved toward the very ambiguities that he once despised. His latest paintings, while executed with thin and often transparent washes of light acrylic color, are decidedly lyrical. Although Bunnard maintains his interest in the armature of his composition—the suggestion of a system of floating rectangles—he does not hesitate to allow ghostly figures of the underpainting to read through, or to wash over certain areas with the kind of spumey, whitish mist that was so characteristic of certain de Kooning paintings.

Another senior young artist whose purism has been sublimated beyond recognition is Ed Ruda. Like Bunnard, and the younger painters, Ruda has not relinquished a certain claim to the rigor of the immediate past (his own included "Cool" and "Systemic" labels). He builds his rather large canvases on a rough system of parallel or striped swaths of color, often leaving a white edge to suggest the illusory quality of the image. The thinly stained overlapping colors and the extreme ambiguity of edge and interstice as well as cloudy underhangs and unexpected free-forms creeping between the bars, place Ruda in a very open, experimental field. His exuberance at the moment interferes at times
with his clear vision of the problem he attacks, but it is probably this exuberance that will carry him to a richer articulation of his new-found liberation.

Carryovers from the brief interest in modular and graphed painting, called “Systemic” by Lawrence Alloway, can be seen in the work of many of the youngest. An obvious example is Gary Bower who recently had his first one man exhibition at O. K. Harris. Bower clings tenaciously to the comfort of a constructed scheme. He usually scores his canvases—which are typically very large—with intersecting lines that form triangular intervals. Once that is done, Bower throws construction to the winds and plays upon his scheme with a variety of methods. Sometimes he washes them over; sometimes he masks them completely; sometimes he lets the color dribble between his lines; sometimes he plays with lights beneath and overwashes, like Bannard. His grid is an excuse, and his free improvisation is what really seems to move him. It is a pretty good beginning, but a studied one, as are the beginnings of several others who seem to be reassured by lattices and vertical sections in the mode of Agnes Martin.

In another improvisatory direction, there are those who, like Larry Poons, have suddenly rediscovered texture and skin and surface. Poons’ clouds of mooncrust with their Museum of Natural History verisimilitude fall far short of Dubuffet’s texturoljies, but his admirers do not seem to make the connection. In a more modified sense, the young David Dio seems interested in the effect of crust and bubbles and blisters when used to modify a monochromatic space. Dio’s irregularly scored canvas in the Whitney is worked to suggest minimum light (he even discreetly applied the de Kooning scrape) and lateral extension. The flickering light of slightly earlier work is now held behind the surface by the opacity of his medium.

The use of masses of varicolored forms spreading toward the edges of large surfaces in free and probably unplanned sequences is seen in many of the youngest. Ronnie Landfield, in his early twenties, has found a temporary formula in which he anchors the lyrical outburst with a flat bar of color at the bottom of his canvas. This combination of modes is not justified in the work itself, but it does help the young artist to open other veins of inquiry for himself. His version of an old “all-over” vision is different from the sprayed surfaces of William Pettet or Natvar Bhavsar whose tendency toward “field” painting is more pronounced. The latter two have insisted on the micro-form as a means of suggesting flat extension infinitely, and have kept low on the color range to avoid unnecessary contrasts of light density.

Jake Berthot also keeps low on the color range, but his references are more to the lyrical mirror-depths of slowly revealed
light, as in Rothko; he bypasses the questionable model of Olitsky. Berthot works very quiet transitions of tone and light. He retains the simplicity of the rectangular structure in order to plunge depthward. By delimiting a central rectangle in some canvases with a void that is a line—but a line invaded from both sides by echoes of local tones—Berthot establishes the ambiguous relationship between the light of the environment and the interior light of the canvas characteristic of Rothko. His feelings are conveyed in subtle shifts from plane to plane, and they are feelings about both space and light—not just the combination of available modes.

Where Berthot keeps to a narrow range, Brice Marden uses no emphatic color at all. Marden is one of the toughest of the younger painters. He combines monochrome canvases from which no light emanates. Whatever light he dispenses is held behind the smoothly impastoed, putty-like surfaces. The infinitesimally small contrasts between these close half-toned canvases require as much attention as the old Ad Reinhardt black paintings did. Marden’s originality marks him off from his more eclectic and studied colleagues.

Although the young who surfaced this year are all related to the Morris Louis tradition more nearly than to the hard edge legacy, there are still a few who have taken their cues from such painters as Stella and Noland; more particularly, Stella. Among these is William Williams, whose strong interfaces of high-intensity geometric forms are impressive. Williams, like the others in his age-group, does not hesitate to break the mode when he feels like it. His painting in the Whitney, for example, has a center in which painterly brush marks contradict the flat equivocations all around it. There are other geometrically inclined artists working in a different direction. Donald Kaufman, for instance, uses cloudy half-tones, grayed but with intonations of primary coloration, to make very recessive compositions such as simple crossed lines with rectangles.

As has been noted by most of these who follow recent painting closely, the various vocabularies that have been suggested to the young during the past decade have been gratefully received and are blithely combined wherever possible. It is not clear whether such cheerful promiscuity is healthy. Certainly the rejection of fixed rhetoric cannot be bad. All those shibboleths about the integrity of the picture plane, the integrity of the “field,” the color value of so-called color painting, the dangers of illusion, the probity of the rectangle, the value of less-is-more—all have been challenged with considerable energy by the young. The suppressed conception of painting as expression of feeling has also been revived, despite the heavy campaign for so-called “objective” art. While much of what we see, at least in the designated places for seeing painting, seems short on conviction and deep feeling, it is still long on experimental openness, which does seem the best condition for painting.