

Christopher Knight. *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, Sunday, August 10, 1986.
Style section, page E 11.

The L.A. invasion of 'It'

Every gallery in town seems to feature this stuff

By Christopher Knight
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It's here.

I'm not quite sure just what this new and decidedly peculiar "It" is (it doesn't have a name yet), but there's no mistaking its presence among us. In fact, it's everywhere.

In what is normally a slow season for art, galleries from Venice to MacArthur Park are suddenly full of It. This doesn't mean that a complete list of characteristics can be cited yet to fully describe It, or even that a full-blown artistic movement is under way. Still, two features seem prominent, and although they appear very different on the surface, a particular bond can be detected between them.

One feature is abstraction. The show called "A New Abstraction," currently at New City Gallery, and the one titled "Paravision," which may be seen at Margo Leavin Gallery, both have a lot of It. So did "Post Pop Art," which was mounted at the Michael Kohn Gallery late last June and comprised the first substantive appearance of It in Los Angeles. Most of the works in these three shows are (or were) abstract paintings.

To focus on the absence of a recognizable or figurative image can be misleading, however, because abstraction per se is no guarantee. Roy Dowell's abstract paintings, currently in a very engaging solo debut at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, seem concerned with something other than It, and so did most of the works in "Recent Abstraction," which closed yesterday at Burnett Miller Gallery. Even some of the paintings in shows otherwise filled with It aren't It. John M. Miller's exploration of perceptual complexity in geometric bars of color, included in the New City show, is a gorgeous abstract painting, but I don't think it's It.

It's other feature is an emphasis on the commodity status of art. Jeff Koons' work from the early 1980s — household appliances coupled with fluorescent lights, included in a group show called "A Brokerage of Desire" at Otis/Parsons Exhibition Center — as well as his more recent photo blowups of liquor advertisements and his stainless steel wet-bar accouterments, on view at

the art gallery shelves. Steinbach is emerging as a leading practitioner of It, having been among the artists included in "Post Pop Art" and now turning up in both "Paravision" and "A Brokerage of Desire." His work partakes of the sleek, geometric abstraction of Minimalist sculpture and the flashy, commodity orientation of Pop. On the surface, at least, the Minimalist-cum-Pop sculptures and paintings Richard Artschwager has made since the 1960s seem to be ancestors of Steinbach's work.

It has other, more recent ancestors, too. The beautiful abstract painting by Gary Stephan in "Paravision," as well as those by Ross Bleckner in "Paravision" and "A New Abstraction," fit that bill. So do the photography-based works by Cindy Sherman, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine and others, which have enjoyed some prominence in recent years and which may currently be seen in the show, "Picture Perfect," at Kuhlenschmidt/Simon Gallery. None of these artists is a photographer in the traditional sense. Rather, they examine what happens when the spectator's experience of the world is mediated by the camera, one of the most common reproduction apparatuses of our time.

In fact, the quality of abstraction and the emphasis on commodities, which are cardinal features of It, appear to be linked by this intervention of the media between the spectator and experience.

Because we've seen so much figurative art in the last five years, any abstract painting that now turns up comes as something of a shock — the shock of the New and Improved. This is the reverse of what happened a decade ago, when eyes weary of seemingly endless variations of minimalist abstraction bugged out in the face of "new image" painting. To a significant degree, figurative art, and especially neo-expressionist painting, became such a big phenomenon so quickly because it was instantly disseminated to every corner of the art-globe through the labyrinthine channels of the media.

Now that that market has been saturated, the pendulum is said to be swinging back from the figurative to the abstract. However, there's an inherent contradiction in believing that cultural forms are a

spond). The audience is also pushing it. The pendulum is helped along by our susceptibility to the purity of all things that seem to be natural. Like the "health conscious" radio ads extolling the virtues of natural sugar over artificial sweeteners, our sentimental nostalgia for nature can be happily exploited by the marketplace.

The market aspect of It, like the market aspect of neo-expressionism It is trying to supplant, puts a lot of people off. Because most (but not all) of the artists who make It live in New York, a commercial cabal will no doubt be claimed to be hard at work. Although I've yet to see a movement on the part of artists in Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston or anywhere else to give away their work for free, the New York marketplace is regularly assailed as monstrous. And it is, if one considers that monstrous means abnormally or prodigiously large.

If you consider monstrous to mean unnatural in character — well, there's the trap of sentimental nostalgia again. Commercial markets don't have anything to do with nature, either. They have to do with money.

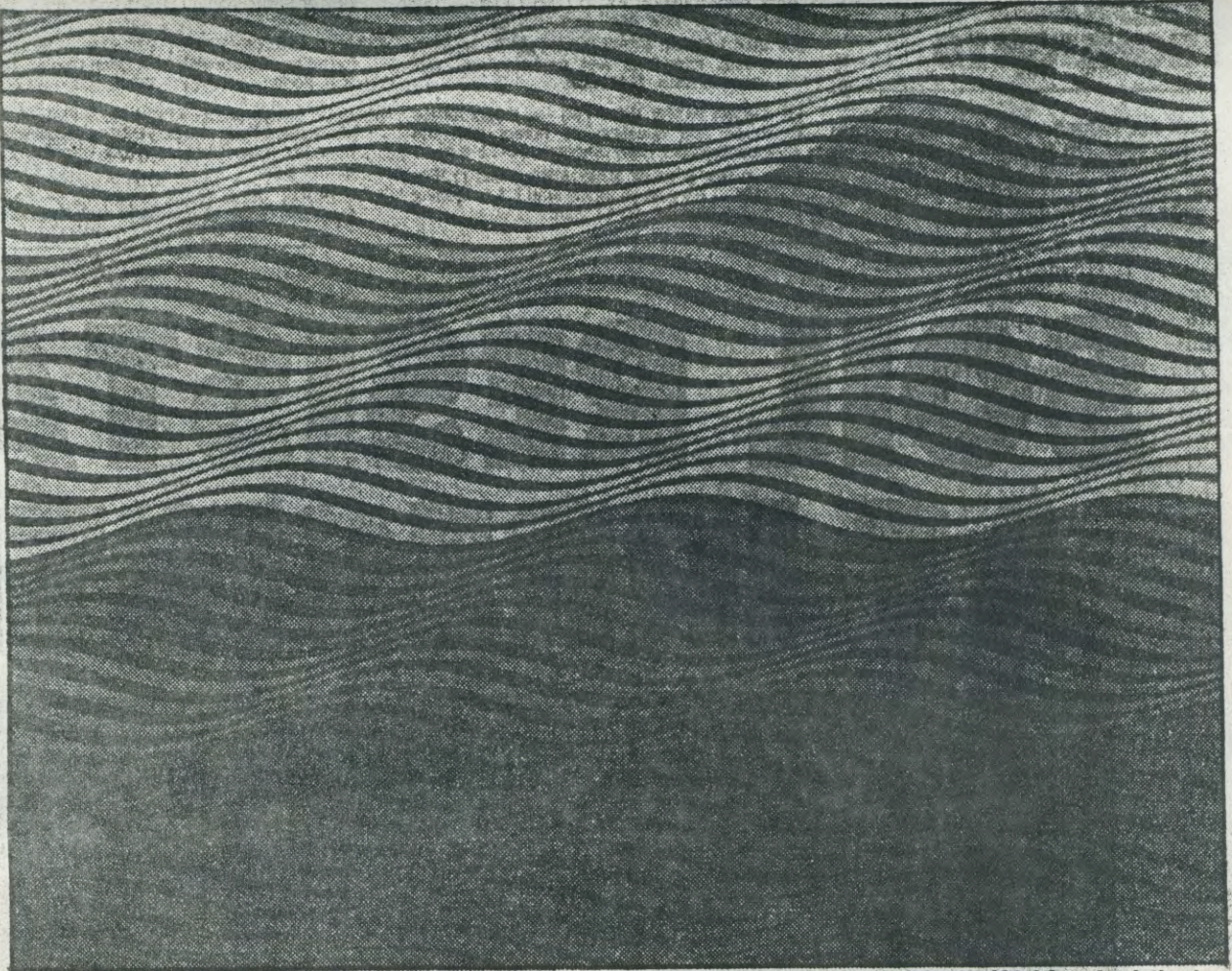
Money moving through the marketplace is an abstract system. Pieces of green paper and circular disks of metal represent that abstraction. It is representational abstraction, too. In the "Paravision" show, Philip Taaffe's "Combine Painting" is a constructed picture of a well-known Op art painting by Bridget Riley that dates from the 1960s. (The title Taaffe has chosen for this linoleum print collage, painted over with acrylic and enamel and mounted on canvas, is an obvious reference to Robert Rauschenberg's 1950s mixtures of painting, sculpture and reproductions — another celebrated ancestor of It.) "Combine Painting" looks sort of like a Riley that has been run through a color Xerox machine.

The material layers of Taaffe's work jibe with the conceptual layers of interpretation that stretch back to Rauschenberg. All works of art, be they Old Master or modern, accumulate layers of interpretation as generation after generation looks at them, thinks about them and decides their meanings. When you go to the L.A. County Museum to peruse the Picassos, Cezannes

Daniel Weinberg Gallery, are one example. Another is the work of Haim Steinbach, who makes Formica-clad shelves on which are displayed such diverse objects as detergent boxes, ice chests, flower vases and lava lamps, all transported straight from the department store or mail-order house to

matter of natural forces or cycles: Culture isn't natural. The pendulum is swinging because, as always, it's being pushed. Artists are pushing it, dealers are pushing it, the media is pushing it and, eventually, the museums will be pushing it, too (as 19th-century institutions, museums are always slowest to re-

and other pictures currently on loan from Soviet museums, and thus more than likely unknown to you except through reproductions, you may well already know, say, Pierre Schneider's recent authoritative interpretation of Matisse's 1908 painting, "The Red Room." Or you may have seen the big, hand-



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some book, "Impressionism and Post-Impressionism," lately published by Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, which features a detail of the painting on its cover. Or perhaps you've read Matisse's contemporary, Maurice Denis, who enthusiastically embraced his elder's work, or Matisse's own illuminating "Notes of a Painter," written in the same year he painted "The Red Room."

At the very least, you know long before the actual experience of viewing that this is a cardinal work of early-20th-century art. You know in advance "how it rates."

This phenomenon, in which mediating layers of interpretation characterize experience, is endemic to life in our Age of Information. Not surprisingly, it's not restricted to the precinct of art. The furious debate now building over the possibility, and the desirability, of stripping away the successive interpretations of the American Constitution in order to return to the original vision of its framers is a shining example.

Whether it's the Constitution or "The Red Room," though, one's understanding is both held in check and enlarged by the interchange of ideas already in play. To a significant degree, the tensions between and among them constitute the very life of meaning. For this reason, it is important to insist that the author or the painter is but one of many players, past and present,

in the on-going discourse.

"Paravision" includes several works that look like painted pictures of earlier art. Importantly, that earlier art is almost always of a discredited kind: Op art, formalist abstraction, color-field painting. (Walter Robinson even makes "spin art" paintings, the kind kids make in carnival arcades.) Long before the actual experience of viewing, we know "how it rates." In fact, part of what it seems to be about is busting up the neat compartments into which we deposit images. Abstract vs. representational is one such division. So is high culture vs. low, abstract painting vs. "spin art." Compartments are designed to hold things in check. It is designed to enlarge them.

On an even larger scale, it confronts a kind of art that was completely, utterly banished from the hierarchy of value in modernism. More than anything else, the bulk of the work in "Paravision," "A Brokerage of Desire," "A New Abstraction" and the now-closed "Post Pop Art" looks like illustrations for any number of texts already written by such important theorists and critics, past and present, as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Benjamin Buchloh, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard and several others.

Most of it is illustration. (You've read the book, now see the painting.) That may be why you get the strange phenomenon of the catalog

essay for "A Brokerage of Desire," or the statement for "Paravision" by the curatorial team of Patricia Collins and Richard Milazzo, being far more interesting than a lot of the art in the respective shows. The Collins & Milazzo statement is especially potent. On a cursory reading it's utterly incoherent, even though you know you could diagram the paragraphlong sentences and they would mean what they say. What's more important is its forceful, loopy, disorientingly poetic sense. It resonates.

By comparison, most of the art in both shows is half-baked. You can tot up any number of significant aspects of reproduction, representation, commodity status and so on, but that doesn't mean that any of these significances display any intensity or depth. It just means they want to be part of the club, to belong inside the compartment that's ostensibly being shaken up. They want to be it.

The effect can be disturbing. When you get nose-to-nose with Olivier Mosset's 21-foot long, seemingly uninflected plane of tour-quoise canvas, and suddenly notice a single, tiny bristle from a paintbrush stuck in the acrylic, or an almost imperceptible fleck of what appears to be pink pigment, you are faced with the awful question, Does that mean something?

Abruptly, inexorably, horribly, you find yourself wondering: Is that it?