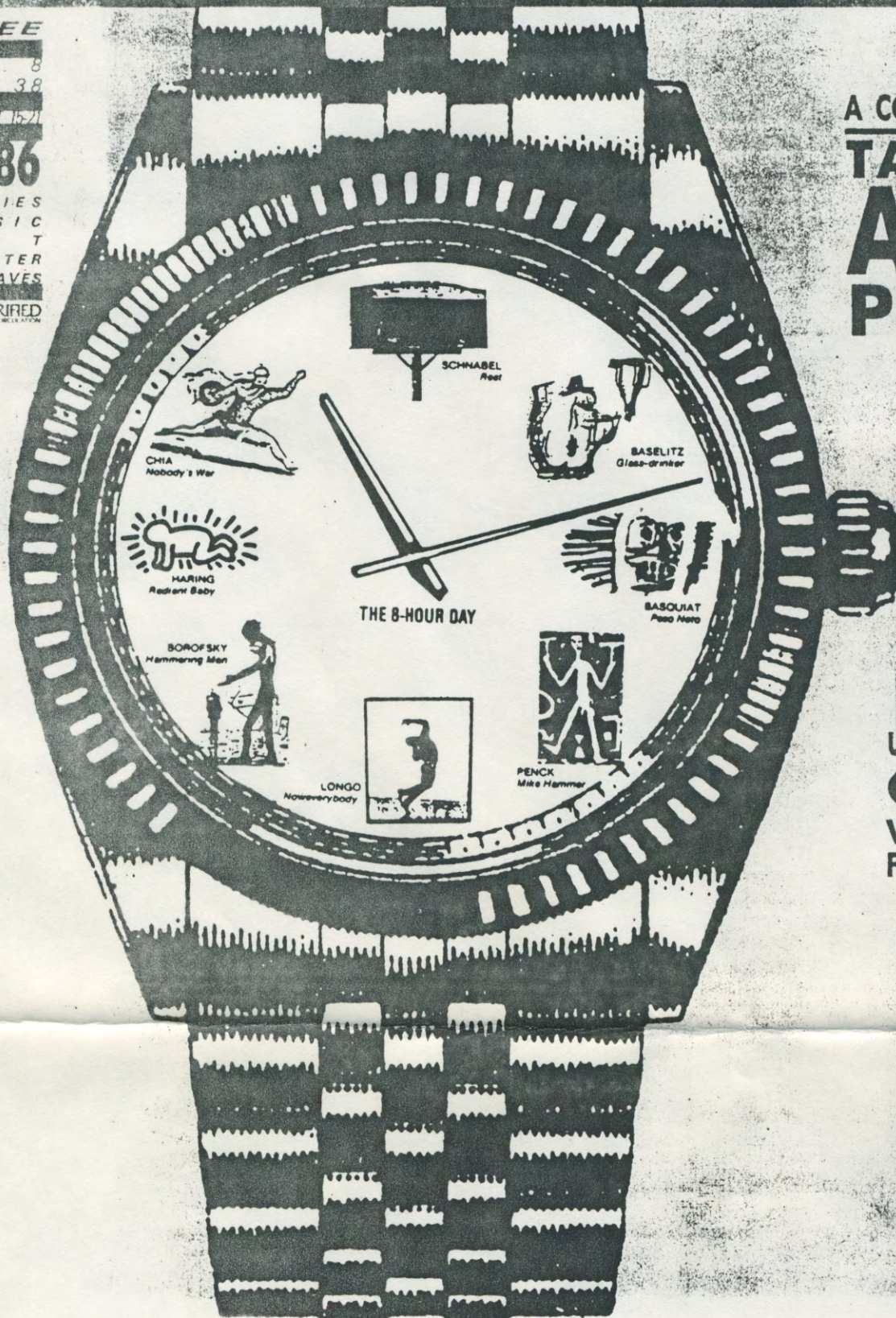


"ERNIE POOK'S COMEEK" PAGE 113 & "LIFE IN HELL" PAGE 8

L.A. WEEKLY

FREE
L. 8
2 38
JUST 15.21
1986
MOVIES
MUSIC
ART
EATER
WAVES
VERIFIED
NEXT CREATION



A COOLING TREND
**TAKING
ART'S
PULSE**

JOHN POWERS
ON
VISIONARY
FILMMAKERS



Over the last four years, while ghostly Teutonic figures have wrestled or floated hollow-eyed and upside-down in vast wildernesses of emotively hurled paint, one kept hearing rumors about abstract painting resurfacing with a vengeance. And it now appears that the latest wave of abstract painting is upon us. No cultural arena other than the art world burns and rebuilds stylistic bridges faster. Neo-expressionism is, for the moment, *passé*, replaced by calculated geometries presumably heralding a new rationalism — or the latest rationalism ("I don't want to feel any more," a New York collector was recently heard to say, "I want to think," as if these modes were mutually exclusive).

Los Angeles is a city with a world-class abstract tradition of its own and it has a chance this summer to survey an unusually broad selection of the new work through the convergence of three group exhibitions: "Paravision" at Margo Leavin Gallery, "Recent Abstraction" at Burnett Miller Gallery, and "A New Abstraction" at New City. The most spectacular and theoretically arcane of these is "Paravision," curated by Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo. This is a dramatically expanded version of a show mounted at Post-

masters Gallery in New York in May 1985.

The most striking aspect of the work in "Paravision" is its emphasis on the materials of mass-media representation, and on commodities themselves. It's as if abstraction has become Pop. But those who have dismissed this art as a regurgitation of Pop are missing the devastating cultural critique implicit in the work. Where Pop admitted mass culture into the rarefied realm of art, the new abstraction proposes that art is merely another form of mass culture. Further, if one is to escape this cooption by mass culture, it will be accomplished not through rejection but through an ecstatic use of its means. A synthetic Sublime is proposed as a late 20th-century mutation of the Romantic ideal of nature.

Even the more conventionally romantic painters such as Gary Stephan, Ross Bleckner, Jonathan Lasker and Charles Clough seem to be included for their intermittent willingness to be carried away by a case of the Psychedelic Wows in their imagery — psychedelia being a short-lived mass-cultural model for transcendentalism. Yet they don't really fit in with the rest of this show — their gifts are too traditional, their pictorial vocabularies too personal. They're on display here more as evolutionary forerunners.

The rest of the artists fairly wallow in one mode of assumed artificiality or another, whether it be secondary sources for imagery or mass-media materials and processes. Philip Taaffe fashions a richly collaged version of Bridget Riley's optical wave patterns; Walter Robinson offers two

large, beautifully controlled spin-art paintings; David Diaio appropriates a photograph of an early installation of Malevich's paintings; Calvin Brown, Peter Halley and Peter Hopkins all use Da-Glo paint in their "Neo-Geo" abstract paintings; Gretchen Bender, Sarah Charlesworth and Barbara Kruger employ conventions of photographic reproduction in ways that alter or even obliterate the original photographic subject. Hiam Steinbach goes so far as to stock his expertly milled and laminated triangular shelving with pristine goods right out of the box — in this case, six bubbling lava lamps and two stacks of plastic picnic coolers. Steinbach's altar to the consumer spoofs the geometric implacability of Don Judd's wall sculpture while investing otherwise inert and marginal objects with the theatrical trappings of metaphysical significance.

Clearly, "Paravision" is not strictly an exhibition of abstract paintings. Instead, it attempts to address the paradox of the mass cultural institutionalization of transcendental values that have motivated artists throughout the Modern epoch. Spin art, for instance, is the mass-culture degeneration of Jackson Pollock's gestural cosmos. Walter Robinson's spin-art paintings can be seen as a rehabilitation of a disgraced practice, or as a pessimistic assessment of the ultimate equivalency between the singular, high-art image and its mass-produced clones.

The abstract expressionist belief in a heroic iconography of the self as exemplified in Barnett Newman's vertical zips would, I think, strike most of these artists as either hubristic or naive. The art object is no longer believed in as a living thing, a spiritual vessel. It now exists as a media-echo of desire, an antenna for texts or codes already in place.

There are a lot of paintings in the show that wear an abstract facade, but they are intended as culturally filtered, rather than primary, experiences. "Neo-Geo" is the recent appellation coined to describe the resurrected hard-edged abstraction favored by several of these painters, the "neo" prefix suggesting an awareness of the convention of vanguard geometries being practiced.

by stephen westfall

Peter Halley is probably the best-known and most controversial of the artists who have fallen under the Neo-Geo tag. Like many of the others, he uses Da-Glo colors along with black and white. His paintings are distinguished by extra-thick stretcher bars and blunt rectilinear organization. Usually there will be an emblematic configuration of linear elements intersecting with one or two centrally positioned squares. For Halley, this imagery is less abstract than it is a representation of electrical conduits and cells, the patterns of which might also suggest prison bars. The painting included in this show is less adorned than usual, consisting of three monochrome fluorescent panels: An orange joins a red and both rest on top of a longer horizontal panel of a different, if equally livid, shade of red.

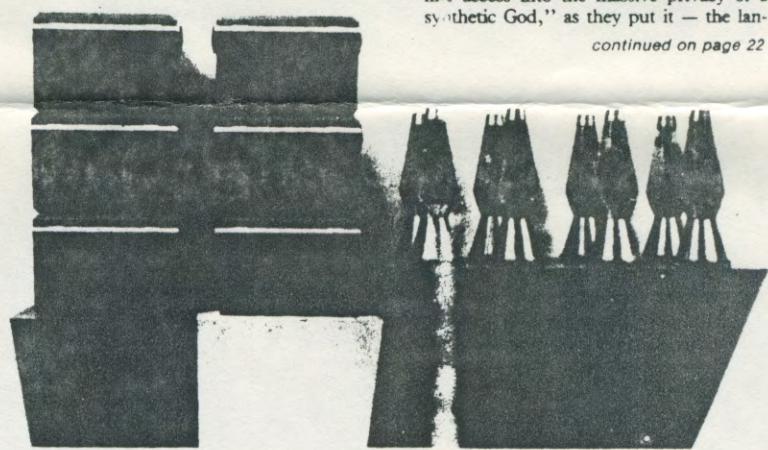
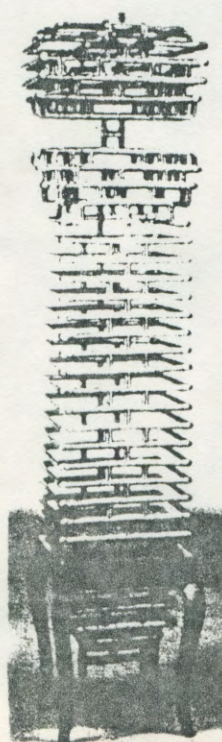
Halley's handsome painting is one of his best, perhaps because it is less readily interpreted. I'm reminded again of Judd in the way the painting makes a "clean entry" into the world as a totally self-referential, color-impregnated geometric volume. And yet, Halley's synthetic color and geometric precision are in this case oddly celebratory, suggesting an artificial model of transcendence. Given what is at stake, the gleefulness of much of the best work in the show may be the most chilling aspect of "Paravision." For if culture has isolated itself from nature to the extent proposed by this art and the curator's statement, perhaps a cautionary attitude would be more apt.

But Collins and Milazzo are not critics *per se*. They are more likely wildly poetic theorists of aesthetics, bending language to create a textual corollary to the art they assemble. Deciphering their jointly authored prose is a treacherous task. People find their oxygenated post-structuralizing either exasperating or hilarious. I count myself in the latter camp, even though both of the authors insist they are serious. Here's an admittedly out-of-context excerpt from their exhibition statement.

In Paravision, then, the understructure is, as it were, on Overload, and is, effectively, and flagrantly, raised to the power of a provisional (retinally disexternalizing and epistemologically disinternalizing) Overstructure. Which is another way of saying that the psychic understructure appears to have assumed the value of the "hypnotic sublime."

You get the idea of what their writing sounds like, or, rather, *doesn't* sound like, for it is writing totally removed from the tradition of oral communication. Just as the art being written about proposes a synthetic Sublime — a proposal made from an ironic distance which "affords us weapon-like access into the massive privacy of a synthetic God," as they put it — the lan-

continued on page 22



guage employed by Collins & Milazzo exists as a paradigm with no natural referent, such as vernacular conversation. In this light the geometric preoccupations of much of the work in "Paravision" take on a dark significance.

Geometric divisions and progressions are found throughout natural forms and forces, of course. But geometry in art has most often been used to represent man's own capacity for creating a harmonizing order of things, or else the benign order of Heaven. One can follow these impulses from Byzantine mosaics through Piero della Francesca, Raphael, Poussin, Seurat, Malevich, Mondrian, Sol Lewitt and L.A.'s own John McLaughlin. Neither order posits an opposition to nature; the first grows from a harmonic interaction between man and nature and the second is a higher harmony for which nature itself is a model. Since its beginnings, geometric abstraction has sought to express that spiritual order which both guides nature and lies behind it.

Can transcendental values be maintained in an era wherein nature is perceived by many to have been absorbed into the image-cycling system of mass culture, and therefore rendered morally weightless? A lot of the abstract painting and sculpture in the shows at Burnett Miller and New City continues to employ style self-consciously, as convention. But it is not curated into adopting a confrontational stance of hyper-artificiality. And much of the work in both exhibitions, particularly at Miller, retains an aura of transcendentalism made poignantly elegiac precisely because of the historically loaded aesthetic vocabulary it retains. Poignancy may not be the object of this art; when intentional it too often leads to bathos. Yet there's no denying that the large and comparatively tentative (it was painted six years ago) Ross Bleckner painting at New City is far more moving than the more recent one of nearly equal size in "Paravision."

Both paintings are related through the luminous vertical striations that Bleckner has intermittently used since around the beginning of the decade. The murky green painting at New City is more spatial, the bands are placed at much wider intervals and overlap a ragged ovoid on a vertical axis that seems part hole and part volume. A battered black line is strung around the center of this form like a looping umbilical cord of anti-matter. The evenly spaced, vertical streaks of light pull the illusionistic depths of the image back to the surface of the picture plane without closing them off. The compacted verticals of the rose-colored painting at Margo Leavin are more like the light-washed ribs of a curtain that has rung down on an act, and the border of crisp white fleurs-de-lis on a flat black background that runs along the top seals the image off with architectonic impassivity which is uncharacteristic of the artist.

The hard-edged painting that makes an appearance at New City and Burnett Miller shuns the defensive ironies of the Neos. At New City, John Miller's four-panelled painting of greenish-black, precisely patterned diagonal dashes on raw canvas generates an optical buzz worthy of the

nation of grittiness and preciousness. Moira Dryer quarters the surface of one panel into black and white rectangles and paints a softly rounded red shape with a black center on another, smaller panel suspended to the lower right from a metal rod as though it were a thought balloon. The two panels offer a tense little dichotomy: They seem to be dreaming of each other.

Over at Miller, Gregory Mahoney is the purely hard-edged painter, laying curving planes of flat color onto triangular wedges of darkly stained wood. The configurations suggest the influence of both Ellsworth Kelly and Leon Polk Smith and point to a sculptural union of image and format found in a lot of late minimalist work. The fetishizing of the abstract painting into the status of "wall-object" is one of the themes of Miller's show. Roy Thurston spreads what appears to be innumerable coats of thin, blackish paint of different color overtones across vertical sheets of wood. The coats are built up to a dense, even polish in vertical strokes that run the length of the panel. The panels are hung low to the floor and this suggestion of weight, along with exposed sides of the panels, furthers the piece's material presence.

Besides Steinbach's frontal tableau in "Paravision," the most compelling of the few sculptures included in any of these shows is Steve Kister's wonderful piece hanging from the ceiling in the center of the Miller gallery. Kister's recent work has moved from airborne, boxy angles of carpeted plywood with fluorescently painted interiors to streamlined Spandex creations that stretch fluidly in all directions like a Martha Graham dancer. In this case, the outer skin of the piece is a charcoal color with sand added as a texture. The pulled, limb-like extensions are sliced through to create apertures to the inside, which is coated with a glossy, whitish-beige paint. The piece looks like a fired ceramic but is lighter, suspended only by a fishing line passing through one opening and out another.

Kister's work has a Modern "look," like an Eames chair, or the TWA terminal at Kennedy Airport. His work and the work in "Paravision" suggest that utter contemporaneity is an illusion of theory. But Kister's work has the freshness of discovery. It seems less predicated on theoretical criteria — that is, reading cultural trends and making an art object which represents that reading, a peculiarly reactive activity.

It should be kept in mind that painting and sculpture are forms of plastic expression. Language plays an important role when we talk about what we've seen. But the primacy of theory among today's plastic artists seems unprecedented. By fulfilling or embodying theory to the exclusion of the little surprises that occur in the studio, information gathered from actual experience, art atrophies into kitsch — no matter how complex the theory. By merely serving as multi-use signifiers (critique, celebration, product) of culture, the new work is in danger of promoting a fascism of detachment.

There's no question in my mind that we are going to be starved once more for mythic symbolism and a more gestural

original Op painters, but with a contemplative subtlety of method and warmth of materials. The fat cruciformality in Harvey Quaytman's overlapping black and blue planes is an open homage to Suprematism from a supremely disciplined and confident painter. John Armleder's emblematic grid of stacked rectangles on an aluminum-colored ground is a surprising combi-

nytic symbolism and a more gestural handling of materials after the latest wave of Cool has passed over us. A question to ponder: The next time geometric abstraction rides the pendulum back into the foreground, will the ironic distance implicit in much of the present work be remembered fondly or itself become a target of critique? Either way it too will have receded into historical style. ■