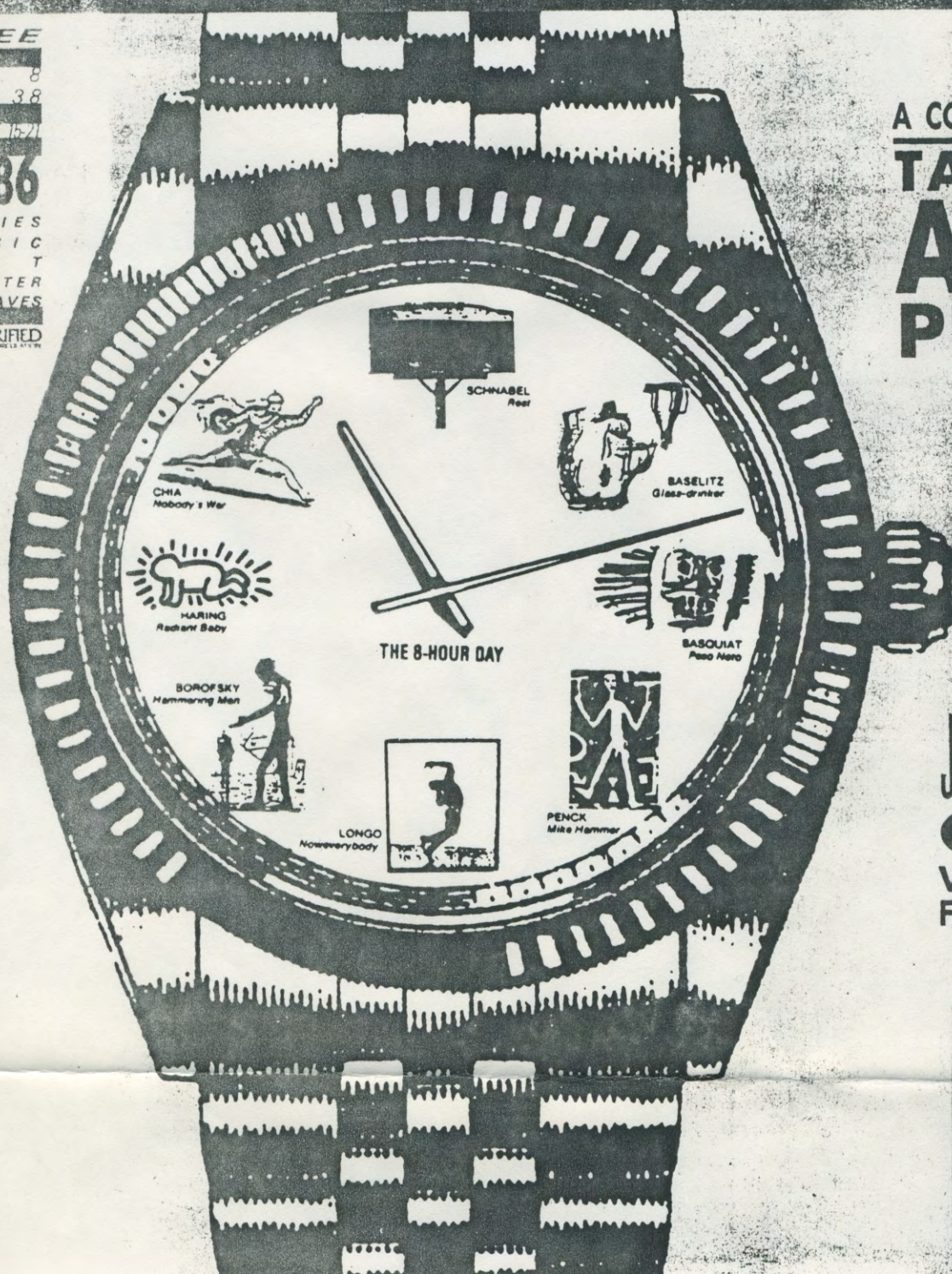


"ERNIE POOK'S COMEEK" PAGE 113 & "LIFE IN HELL" PAGE 8

L.A. WEEKLY

FREE
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38
15/21
1986
MOVIES
MUSIC
ART
THEATER
WAVES
VERIFIED
NOT A GUY



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

JOHN POWERS
ON
VISIONARY
FILMMAKERS



A well-orchestrated campaign has brought us six shows that parade the latest movements — New Abstraction, Neo Geo, Post Pop. The selection of artists is as impetuous as the titles: Their concerns vary widely, yet for the most part they share a somewhat provisional eye for the hard and polished look of either consumer goods on the one hand or monochrome and pattern painting on the other. The cold objectivity characteristic of Minimalism, Pop and Conceptual Art, presumed buried along with those movements beneath the lugubrious impastos of Neo-Expressionism, is on the comeback, according to the evidence shown here. This time, however, it has come dressed to kill.

The art not only looks smart, it "looks smart," since many of the issues this new work seeks to raise are caught up precisely in its being eye-catching, fascinating, fetishistic. The work by and large appears factory-made, artificially enhanced and strikingly high-tech. There are plenty of industrial materials, such as Formica, Plexiglas, stucco and steel — and there's Da-Glo paint by the vat. One artist is even exhibiting a set of lava lamps.

Naturally, people have gotten excited. It's as if the circus had come to town. Or perhaps what's going around is more like the feeling that follows a military invasion: Whether its intention is to liberate or to occupy depends on whom you talk to. Though sanctified by the Word — a cloudy catalog exegesis for "A Brokerage of Desire" at the Otis/Parsons Art Institute, an utterly opaque one for "Paravision" at the Margo Leavin Gallery — the shows on the whole struck most people as being less missionary than mercenary. And justifiably so, since I don't believe the objective was to win over our hearts and minds so much as to capture an economic beachhead.

Of course, speculation on the part of dealers, collectors, artists, critics and curators is guaranteed to be high when a new sensibility in art appears on the rise. Among other things, the continued well-being of the business is at stake. Also, the

inevitable impact of such speculation on the way new art is perceived and appraised proves always too extensive to ignore. However, it's another matter entirely when a new sensibility seems concocted solely in order to stimulate speculation.

Suspicion would appear to be warranted in this case, not only because of the way these shows pitched their art as being brand-spanking new, but because of the sheer expense apparent in the fabrication of a lot of the work, which makes explicit its heavy reliance on a high return. At the same time, it would be too easy to dismiss the whole thing as merely a product of art-world collusion. While the distinction between a critical outlook and outright cynicism grows increasingly blurred these days on both sides of the art, this should only stress our urgent need for such a distinction to be made.

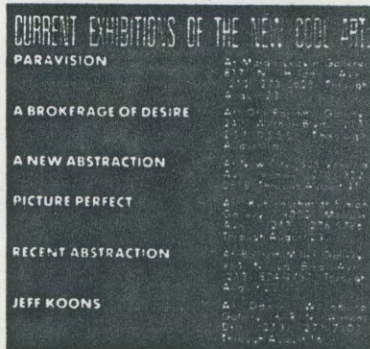
How, then, might we otherwise account for the seemingly sudden emergence of all this art?

"The pendulum swings again" is the blunt assessment that begins the press

release for "A New Abstraction," a show of about 20 abstract paintings currently up at New City in Venice. If true, then indeed nothing more need be said, since the image of a swinging pendulum is also a fairly apt emblem of the end of history.

According to the pendulum scenario, the art world's wagon train of progress is drawn into a tight circle in the final hope of protecting its present turf. New styles can no longer evolve, and instead, once-dormant styles are revived, only to remain torpid even while on view until replaced at the first sign of a drop in their market value. Change is valued only because it provides a relief to boredom, mechanically whetting jaded appetites. It's an attractive formula, if only for its simplicity, and

continued on page 22



by lane relyea

HOT COMMODITIES

COOL ART,

ART COOLS DOWN

The sweaty vertigo of Neo-Expressionism has given way to a revived rationalism. Is the newest art in L.A. and New York the Media Generation's ticket to transcendence or just the latest market hype?

1 — Joel Otterson, **ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**, 1986; photo: Douglas M. Parker.

2 — Philip Taaffe, **MOONMAN**; photo: Anne Fishbein.

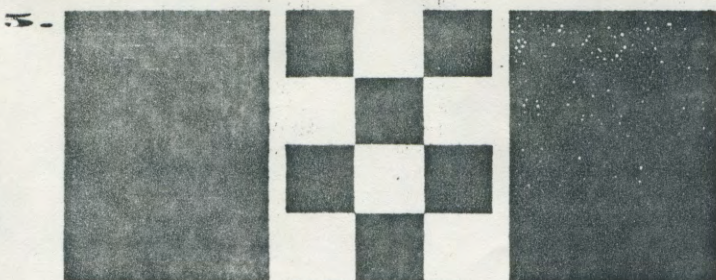
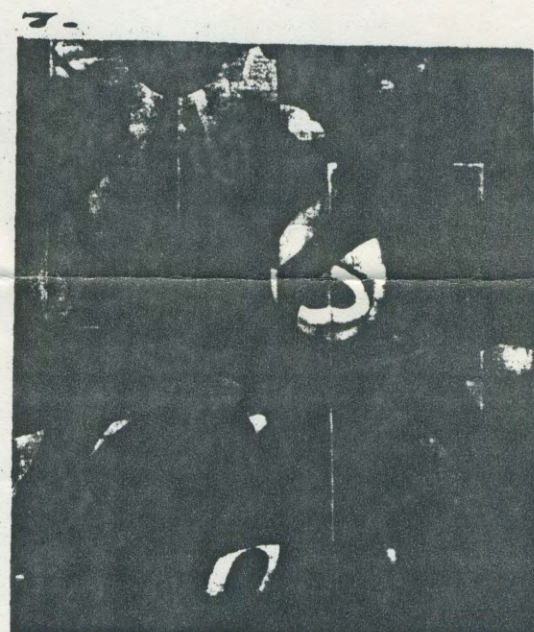
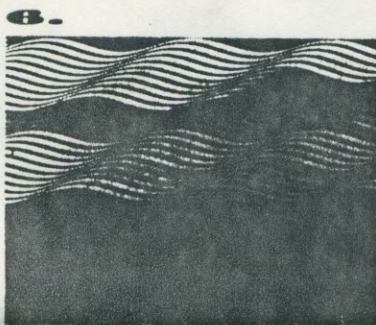
3 — John M. Miller, "NO. 35"; photo: Anne Fishbein.

4 — Haim Steinbach, **VINYL THAT ALREADY LOOKS WET**, 1986; photo: David Lubarsky.

5 — Mike Kelley, **BLACK & WHITE EYE RESTS**, NO. 1, NO. 2, NO. 3; photo: Anne Fishbein.

6 — Philip Taaffe, **COMBINE PAINTING**, 1986; photo: courtesy of Margo Leavin Gallery.

7 — Bill Komoeki, **UNTITLED**; photo: Anne Fishbein.



would even appear applicable to the art being considered. With its poker-faced exteriors, its sci-fi reworkings of Op psychedelia and its calculated geometric patternings, this art does, after all, serve as a perfect alternative to the excessive histrionics and self-indulgent sentimentalism of Neo-Expressionist painting. The problem is that this explanation would also render the new art pointless, since it presupposes a stalemate situation in which all art movements advance only so that they may eventually retreat again.

Fortunately, there is a more constructive explanation of art's present cooling trend, which would cite this work as not so much a break with the past as a development out of it. Specifically, many of the issues raised by the new art can be seen to proceed from a critical investigation inaugurated nearly a decade ago by a generation of artists concerned with a so-called "crisis of representation." These artists, including Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger, began their careers questioning the way in which social relations are conditioned by their reproduction in pictures and narratives — mediation through the images and stories that enjoy wide circulation in the culture. Reflected in their art was a more general critique of the stage of capitalist development wherein the means to control no longer resided in production but in reproduction, no longer in the geographic space of the locomotive but in the fictional space of billboards, magazines and TV. It was there that people could best be exemplified, their relations to others prefigured, and, most importantly, their sustained fascination with commodities secured. In this way, representation could be seen as paralleling capitalism's quest to render all things equivalent, to reduce everything to a common rate of exchange.

In representation, anything that was once bound to issues of either finality or transcendence, history or nature, could be abstracted and thereby rendered utterly contingent, opened up to the most instrumental use. Nothing was exempt from this kind of appropriation, least of all other representations, since they were perhaps the easiest to re-reproduce. It was the power inherent in contemporary mechanical representation that most influenced these artists, and in a broader sense informed nearly all art that has been so far termed Postmodern.

All of this more or less still applies, not least because our lives remain cast as shadows against a world of spectacular imagery attendant to corporate interests. But this world is, at the same time, undergoing a change prompted by forces that have developed from within: Telecommunications and data processing are respinning the web that once charted the distribution of commodities and their promotional imagery, establishing new lines more conducive to the flow of information. This new informational network, if nothing else, requires that objects become more "user-friendly." Already the TV screen, which once held us hypnotically captivated, has been reconceived to function as a computer

jects now become themselves promoters of an entirely different and weightless commodity; they become conductors of the continual electronic pulse of information.

It is this vision of the weightlessness of things in an information-based culture to which much of the new art speaks — the abstractness of computer languages informs most of the new abstract paintings. Moreover, in many of the works displayed in the current spate of new shows, these notions are combined. In Jack Goldstein's new painting, included in "Picture Perfect" at the Kuhlenschmidt/Simon Gallery, a laboratory-enhanced, micro-photographic image spans the surface of what appears more like a box than a canvas. Similarly, Peter Halley (in "Paravision" and recently in "Post Pop" at the Michael Kohn Gallery) and Jeff Koons (in "A Brokerage of Desire") have pursued ways to evoke the presence of objects beyond their materiality.

Koons encases vintage Hoover vacuum cleaners in Plexiglas boxes outfitted with neon lighting, which make the Hoovers glow supernaturally. Halley, on the other hand, employs Da-Glo paint on his monochrome canvases not only to simulate an aura, but to amplify it. In this work, the warm resonance once associated with the color-field paintings of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko is at once artificially enhanced and infinitely chilled precisely by its artificiality.

Not all the artworks in these shows reflect critically on the current state of affairs. In particular, Gary Stephan's painting in "Paravision" indicates a more philosophical interest in the abstract tradition, and without appearing any less rigorous for it. Of the works that do aspire to critical attention, some fare better than others. For instance, the work of Allan McCollum (in "Picture Perfect") is exemplary in describing how the process of serial reproduction conditions the way we perceive commodities. His paintings, frames and all, are plaster-cast in mass quantity, varying only in size and color, so that each can appear slightly different without its being unique, since its singularity relies on its position in the series.

Then again, the work of Meyer Vaisman ("Paravision") portrays painting as a craft sadly at odds with mass reproduction. As if manufacturing his work according to the process of four-color (photographic) separation, Vaisman hangs his canvases on the wall in stacks of three, with the outermost surface displaying formally arranged blocks of primary colors. Here, the Warholian desire to be a machine is played out by Vaisman as a kind of travesty, as a melodrama portraying the liquidation of painting's tradition, in which technology is dressed up as an all too transparent villain.

The same holds true for much of the work in these shows. As with Oliver Mosset's big green monochrome in "Paravision," or Alan Belcher's colorful plasticware in "A Brokerage of Desire," reference to the commodity is too often made not through critical commentary but by sharing in its trauma, by appearing seductive but also victimized, emptied out.

been reconceived to function as a computer terminal with which we can "interface."

Likewise, a whole range of consumer products, from watches and telephones to cars and ovens, has been adapted to perform the role of display center. The induction of such objects into a vast communications circuitry in turn displaces them from the figurative world of their promotional images, in which they had gained the weight of significance and value. These ob-

The problem, then, is not whether this art needs to be qualified by criticism. Rather, it is that the work seems made precisely to look needy, even vacuous. This, more than its space-age facades, is what makes the art appear so cold. And it is this melancholy, this ambivalence, which finally gives most of this work its greatest affinity to commodities. As a critical art front, however, it must rely too heavily on the benefit of the doubt. ■