

ART

Art and Its Double

By Roberta Smith

Painting as Post-Conceptual appropriation takes many forms these days. The old masterish Social Realism of Komar and Melamid certainly qualifies, the mannered reprises of Carlo Maria Mariani might (otherwise I can't think of an excuse for doing them). And there are always the quotations which form parts of various Salles and Schnabels and hordes of imitators. But most pointed is the replication of familiar or famous works on a one-on-one basis, an area within which a surprising number of artists are finding room to move. Three such artists are currently showing in the East Village and none of them is Mike Bidlo.

Sherrie Levine, a founder of this line of argument and its purest practioner, has mounted a show at Nature Morte which is more or less a Conceptual installation. The individual works here lack the visual punch of her last show, which consisted of taut little watercolor renditions of Leger, Mondrian, Stuart Davis, and Moholy-Nagy paintings done from reproduction. Still, as an ensemble it is a provocative show and extremely topical, because it juxtaposes abstraction and representation in terms of radicality of form versus radicality of subject matter.

In this exhibition Levine alternates graphite drawings "after" Egon Schiele with drawings "after" Kasimir Malevich. She also interrupts the line of drawings with indications of a completely new ven-

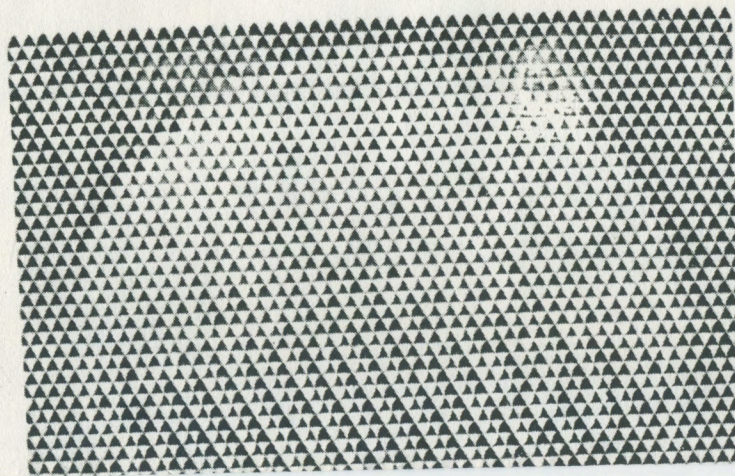
drawings. Much more engrossing is the way the Malevich drawings—partly by association, partly through Levine's translation—are imbued with an eerie *fin de siecle* sensuality which, while suggesting the wild possibility that they were made by Whistler, also have a visual life of their own. Here Malevich's white fields become milky and atmospheric, seeming to alternately inhale and exhale their floating bars and crosses. Their effect—altogether more sensuous and exposed (even more naked) than the drawings af-

These familiar images are brought to you via a material and a technique which endows them with an obdurate elegance quite alien to most Western painting. Their gleaming perfection is reminiscent of Japanese screens and cabinets, alluding to a tradition of craftsmanship so intense and implicitly dignified that individuality is simply not an issue. Simultaneously—to continue the east-west mental ping pong—this work would be welcome at company headquarters. It has the look of abstract advertising, pointing up (as Dan Graham already has) the gray area sometimes found between hard edge abstraction and corporate logos.

The above are all credible extrapolations from the objects, but what's most interesting is that none of them is necessarily true. Although these works have never been exhibited before, they are not part of the latest thing, but were done in 1977 and 1978—when Jacobs, who is 39, was showing at O. K. Harris. This fact raises the issue of context. Put these in O. K. Harris and consider their rather jokey titles (*Study for Piet's de Resistance*, *Frank's Dilemma*, *American Tro-*

Stouts. He's also showing two paintings more distinctly his own, but they are of a piece with the prevailing mood. *Shaded Sphere*—dense packed black geometric shapes on a tan field—has a kind of Neo-Plastic/Surrealist Arpishness which could almost be an early Marca-Relli; in *Green/White/Stoppages* a flock of Duchamp's famous curved silhouettes overlay a white square banded left and bottom in green (pointed out to me as an Ellsworth Kelly).

After such general and specific hits of *deja vu*, the eccentricity of Taaffe's art-making technique begins to assert itself and may actually be what you spend most of your time looking at. Excepting the "Stouts" (which are painted over actual-size photographs and aren't nearly so interesting), Taaffe has evolved an elaborate, ritualistic version of collage. His procedure intricately meshes mechanical reproduction and hand-working, and pits printing and painting, ink and canvas, disposability and permanence against one another. For the most part these "paintings" are linoprints on white or faintly tinted paper which are carefully matched up, glued onto canvas,

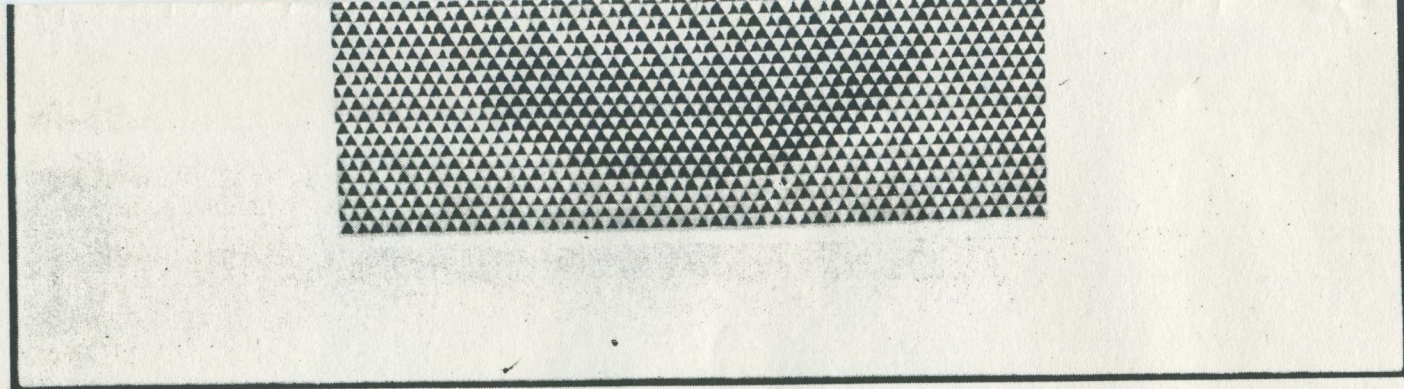


ere, oil on board paintings. One is "after" Malevich's white on white (here pink on yellow), the other is "after" a gray cross on black by one of his students, Ilya Chashnik. All these works date from 1917. The Schieles—semierotic renderings of children and adolescents—caused him to be thrown in jail; Malevich's spiritualistic Suprematism, initially seen as the aesthetic parallel to the Russian Revolution, was soon out of favor. In contrasting these sacred and profane expressions of radicality, Levine evokes a time when modern artists of various styles were often found to be socially unacceptable, when romantic faith in individuality could get you into real trouble, rather than guarantee a lifetime supply of cigars.

Once again Levine is copying from a copy—mostly black and white photographs—retranslating the mechanically reproduced back into the realm of the handmade, and also producing a second kind of original. That she is returning to drawing what began as drawing—rather than converting it to a completely different medium (oil paintings into watercolors)—is theoretically okay. Visually however, it places her in more direct competition with the originals, a problem aggravated by Levine's being a better watercolorist than draughtsperson. (The paintings on wood avoid these problems: they offer a way of painting which maintains a necessary distance from the original and seems full of possibilities, but only a larger selection will tell.)

In the drawings, what obtains is not so much startling shifts in medium and scale, but subtle points about the ineffables of presence and touch—both their innateness and uncontrollability. Also operating is a form of visual art historical critique and cross referencing in which the Malevichs fair better than the Schieles.

That, in Levine's hands, Schiele's figures often take on the big-eyed sadness of Keene's urchins is an interesting inversion of assumed value, but it doesn't stop me from wishing the Levines were better



Shaded Sphere, Philip Taaffe: stepping back in art time

ter Schiele—is further proof of Levine's ability to turn art by men into women's work, and into a critique of both—through the deceptively simple act of making it again and different. (Nature Morte, 204 East 10th Street, 420-9544, through October 28)

If Levine scavenges mostly from the early moderns, Jim Jacobs is mining the fields of late modernism (all puns intended). And while Levine relocates and explicates the effects of mechanical reproduction via hand-making, Jacob's objects exude a perfection at once high-tech and timeless, which is also—an additional twist—both corporately Western and Oriental.

Jacobs reproduces the work of '60s masters on impeccably lacquered panels in bright primaries, blacks, and whites. His Albers, Stella, late Mondrians (which look pretty '60s here), as well as his generic non-Johnsonian target and American flag are always illusionistically folded at one corner like paper-thin reproductions. Sometimes the folded images are isolated on big fields of blue, orange, or Tropicana yellow; sometimes they are complete in themselves, as in the striped Stella and some of the Albers and Mondrians—modernist rectangles transformed into '60s-shaped canvases after the fact.

picana), and you've got what used to be called "art about art," one of the sleazier veins of aesthetic endeavor. Put them in the early '80s East Village and you've got appropriation and deconstruction. Still, it's nice to know that everything wasn't done yesterday by someone born yesterday.

Jacobs's intentions and titles aside, the cool surface and hot color of the lacquered wood is very strong. The Mondrians are the best and most transgressed against. Folded, cut into, often in the wrong colors, they start to look like apartment floor plans; also good is *Folded Target*, a re-generalized, logo-ized Johns-Noland-McCracken. (International with Monument, 111 East 7th Street, 420-0517, through October 28)

Philip Taaffe's art reproductions are even more physically complex than Jacobs's but in the opposite direction. Instead of looking spanking new, they have the faded patina of age. Like several other artists in this gallery, Taaffe seems to yearn for the bygone glamour, scale, and general look of minor European masters or less known American ones, and stepping into his show is like stepping back in time.

He recreates Bridget Riley and Vasarely Op paintings, plus a couple of Myron

touched-up, and then enameled to form an ostensibly single surface. Sometimes this is quite obsessive—the "Vasarely" seems laid on in tiny triangles whose sides are all carefully curved or not; sometimes it's cruder and will remind you of wall- or billboard-papering. Sometimes it's both: the two panel *Adam and Eve* is a pair of "Rileys" which are mirror images of each other. Always the result is a very strange object, a thin, weightless facsimile of someone else's painting which has been laboriously reworked, worked over, and overworked, and which also looks older and more fragile than the original.

In fact, Taaffe's loving, obsessive surgical technique is more old-fashioned than the goals of the artists he copies. The image, the scale, the surface—everything seems to be about going backward, maybe because they seem so strangely sincere. Even the Duchamp-Kelly seems without irony; it just looks like the work of some derivative desperately confused European painter circa 1958. What holds me in Taaffe's work may not be any good, nor does it seem particularly visual; it's a very particular rather mournful emotional tone: as if he would really prefer to be working then rather than now. (Pat Hearn, 94 Avenue B, 598-4282, through October 28)