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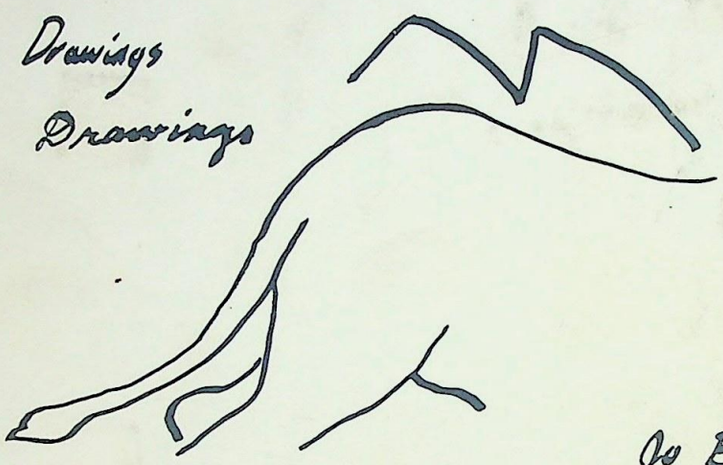

Jo Gaer
Bruce Robbins

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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

THE ART OF JO BAER : A CRITICAL ESSAY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN AND C.S.
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PREFACE

Much of the information pertaining to Jo Baer's recent collaborative work with Bruce Robbins and to items of biographical interest was provided by Jo Baer herself whom I interviewed in her home in Ardee on February 17, 1982.

INTRODUCTION

In all her work Jo Baer approaches pieces as problems in objective formalism which are to be solved in an almost systematic manner. Once the "solution" to these formal problems have been found in individual works or series she then moves on to different problems, often interpreted as extreme changes in style. Her work can be divided into at least three distinct periods - the period of the early Abstract Expressionist experiments (1957 - 1960); the period of her Minimal work (1962 - 1974) which includes the transitional period of her "Wraparound" and "Double-Bar" paintings; and, most recently, the period of her investigations into the possibility of integrating figurative imagery in space without it becoming illustrative.

It is the thirty or so paintings of her Minimal period for which Baer is currently best known - flat, simplified, geometric forms that have an austere and temporal quality in their objectiveness. Around 1970 - 1974, this work had reached a pinnacle of sorts with the completion of her "Wraparound" paintings and "Double-Bar" series. In one sense these works epitomized her mature style. The "Double-Bar" paintings used black bands of pure colour stretched around the edge of the canvas as an optical effect when juxtaposed beside a flat, neutral area of colour at the centre of the canvas. They brought her investigations of balance, unity, form, and her experiments with Gestalt theory to a conclusion. These paintings and the work immediately preceding them had all dealt with painting as an absolute activity in itself with an emphasis on the material qualities of the work, thereby complying with one of the dicta

of Minimal theory which had interested Baer and several other American painters during the late sixties and early seventies.

The "Wraparound" paintings are a variation of sorts on the same theme, except that these paintings are more overtly sculptural and less constricting in form. The colours run over the stretcher bars completely and the vertical canvases in the series are hung four inches off the floor. (The horizontal canvases are hung one inch off the floor). The positioning of the canvases is intentional so that one views them almost as sculptures - one is aware of three surfaces rather than one.

By the late '70's Baer had achieved the reputation of being an "international" artist with a body of work of great importance behind her -- quite an achievement for a woman working in a field dominated by male artists in the highly competitive New York art scene. At least some of her success can be attributed to her strong almost masculine assertiveness and drive and her refusal to accept secondbest. An example of her integrity has been her ongoing commitment to painting, despite criticism from her contemporaries, many of whom turned to sculptural concerns in the sixties (Donald Judd, Robert Morris) in a dogmatic attempt to condemn painting as mere illusionism. This commitment has prevailed through to her most recent work as she continues to attempt to resove certain formal problems through painting despite an inward fear that the genre of painting as an effective and progressive activity is perhaps dying. Baer isn't sure but she is self-determined enough to find out for herself.

In view of her success in New York, Baer's decision in 1976 to leave America for the relative isolation and seclusion of Ireland seems curious. In fact, it is difficult for her to articulate why exactly she left New York for Ardee, a small farming community near Drogheda, north of Dublin. Certainly it was a period of transition for her as the power of the Minimal type imagery she was using was diminishing by the late sixties. In fact, due to the complex and difficult nature of the work itself and in terms of the gallery system that Baer was working within, the work was becoming unsaleable. Not that this specifically had dominated Baer's decision to "change", for by the spring of 1976 her work had been undergoing a transition anyway. The freer, more colourful experiments of the "Wraparound" pieces eventually led to the less formal style that characterizes her current figurative pieces.

For the last four years Baer has collaborated with British artist Bruce Robbins (they live and work in Ardee) on large canvases and a series of drawings using figurative imagery exclusively. The result is large (4ft by 5ft) delicate and fragmented drawings which allude to primitive cave drawings more than anything else. The canvases are very large with an emphasis on the fragmentation of images, worked in heavy black and white, light and dark contrasts. Both artists have developed increasingly complex attitudes towards the representation of reality. They tend to reduce painting to a definite number of contingent parts using in a premeditated way the devices of figurative painting. Therefore they tend to use parts of objects in their work, in which anything will do....star charts,

horses, whips because essentially the subject matter is irrelevant. Like Baer's earlier work it is formal concerns once again that interest her. Figurative imagery is dealt with in abstract terms until it becomes abstracted itself. This distinguishes their work from a lot of the current figurative investigations being done by artists who tend to use imagery with a more identifiable social meaning.

The difference between these new collaborative pieces and Baer's early work seems vast in terms of style and content. Upon initial viewing these pieces are so different that one is apt to question the continuity of Baer's work in view of such an extreme change in style. Actually, some of the same concerns that interested Baer in previous pieces are dealt with by herself and Robbins in a different manner. For example, the tension created by the large areas of flat colour contrasted by the delicate, floating images in their drawings is not dissimilar to the tension created by the bands of colour on either side of a neutral area in the "Double-Bar" paintings. Each image can be viewed in isolation from the rest of the piece or as a whole. Baer also approaches these new collaborations with the same objectivity and emphasis on materiality that her earlier work developed from. These works continue to embody a search for purity in form and structure.

Baer and Robbins are just beginning to produce pieces which they are pleased with ---both are perfectionists, Baer particularly has the habit of destroying work until she is satisfied. The figurative format they have adopted has taken

some adjustment. This thesis coincides with the first public showing of their drawings and paintings at the Lisson gallery in London.

They have been working in collaboration on these pieces for the last four years but up until now they have been having problems persuading any gallery to exhibit the work. The older, more established dealers in New York have been unable to deal with the change in Baer's style, and the newer galleries are only now coming round to showing the work, most probably because of the similarities to the current "post-modernist figurative" trend in painting. These new pieces represent Baer's willingness to move from the more formal rhetoric of the previous Minimal paintings to new variations of figurative representation.

CHAPTER I: THE EARLY YEARS (1929-1968)

Jo Baer was born Josephine Gail Klienberg, August 7, 1929, in Seattle, Washington. Even now Baer identifies closely with the Northwest where she grew up. There is a deeply-rooted bond between herself and nature evoking a certain independence of mind and spirit. Baer believes that the untamed, mountainous terrain in the Northwest has been conducive to the formation of many artistic personalities in America, Jackson Pollock and Edward Kienholz to name a few. Certainly Baer attributes much of her own independence to her upbringing in the Northwest and to the support and encouragement her parents were to give her in terms of establishing a career. As a result she regarded her future as being entirely in her own hands, reliant on the direction that her own career and interests might take her, rather than controlled by the constraints of marriage and family. As with most women artists there arose some conflict between the woman and the artist which often resulted in the breakdown of personal relationships but Baer has shown a particular amount of dedication and confidence when it concerns her work. Unfortunately, such self-assurance was unusual amongst women in the late forties, early fifties, even in America. Women artists at this time were still working very much outside of the male mainstream, with a few exceptions. Baer's generation (Yvonne Rainer, Eva Hesse, Joan Mitchell) were among the first women artists to bridge the gap between the overtly male dominated art establishment and the work of serious women artists.

After doing a degree in biology at the University of Washington, Baer moved to New York and worked in the graduate

faculty in Physiological Psychology at the New School, New York City. She moved to Los Angelos with her husband television writer Richard Baer and around 1957 she began painting. These first pieces were fairly inconsequential, rather naive works in the Abstract Expressionist style, most of which she destroyed. Because of her scientific background and lack of formal art instruction it took her some time to adjust to a format with which she was comfortable. By 1960 her marriage to Baer had ended and she was back in New York and just beginning to experiment with the reductive, hard edge style that was to characterize much of her later work. By the summer of 1962 Baer had begun her first mature series of works, a group of paintings in varying shapes (small squares, large squares, vertical and horizontal rectangles) with enclosing borders of dark colour contrasting a large central region of flat neutral colour:-

> In a normal reading of black and white, one of the areas is perceived as shape and the other as space. By carefully adjusting to the relative dimensions and placements of areas, Baer controlled tension throughout the whole painting so that each area held the surfacw without dominating it. The potentially dominant black bands are carefully balanced by a larger area of the potentially passive light center.[1]

So, in these pieces, minimal form and colour changes take place against a monotonous backgroudn and monochromatic colour plane. The neutrality of the background enhances the colour of the black bands without letting them dominate the picture plane.

Baer's scientific background prevails in these paintings which relate to theories of Gestalt psychology - in vogue at

the time Baer was working. In Gestalt theory, "visual forms are perceived by organizing them into 'wholes" or patterns. Concpets like squareness, roundness and so on, previously thought to be generalized or abstract, are considered the foundation of perception."[2] In Baer's paintings the colour lines within the black bands allow one to view the surface of the picture plane as a whole as the colour distracts the eye from regarding the canvas in a three dimensional manner (e.g. as a window receding into space). Outlining the central white area within the black bands emphasizes the wholeness of the surface of the painting. Flatness is of the utmost importance in these works so that no area appears to recede or advance in relation to another.

To understand the origins of the attitude that would produce this cool, objective, apparently unemotional type of painting requires an idea of what New York was like in the sixties ---the artistic community and sctivity that flourished there and what this activity meant to the formation of radical American painting.

Baer lived in New York with her second husband John Wellesley, also a painter. Through Wellesley she was introduced to a considerable number of artists who were living and working in New York at the time. For the most part artists congregated in each other's lofts and in bars around Greenwich Village. For Baer it wasn't a matter of "breaking in" to such groups, she was already close to the heart of the intense artistic activity that existed in New York art circles in the 60's

because of her work.

The position and importance of American painting had escalated by the 50's/60's with the patronization of artists by critics (Clement Greenberg/Donald Judd) and the support and encouragement provided by other artists in relation to each other's work. Also, many paintings from the European tradition had accumulated at the Metropolitan and Frick Museums enabling American artists to acquire structural elements from older, more renowned painters. The two collections were a school for many artists and ultimately the cause of an "educated" sort of rebellion.

> The superior quality of the new painting and the high proportion of good artists is undeniable. American Art had been provincial; it is now international and at the leading edge of invention.[3]

This statement, written in 1962 by the artist and critic Donald Judd, a contemporary of Baer's, suggests that the state of American painting had indeed improved by the late fifties and early sixties with the Abstract Expressionist innovations of artists like Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline. Pollock's work stressed the importance of the "action" of painting -- each application of paint was to be autonomous and complete within its own limits. In the early fifties the New York School consisted of mainly Abstract Expressionist type work, large expressive pieces involved with the physicality of painting resulting in heavy, painterly canvases. Baer experimented initially with this style producing a few early, unimportant, awkward paintings. The advent of POP art marked the decline

in importance of the Abstract Expressionist work. Nevertheless, it was out of this style that many prominent artists emerged. Abstract Expressionist concerns had a profound effect on most of the work of the newer artists who produced work either as a reaction against Expressionism, or as an extension of it.

At least some of the generation of painters who emerged after Pollock took his ideas further by creating works that rejected everyday emotional and independent experiences completely, concentrating on the material qualities of painting and regarding it as an absolute activity in itself. Baer's Minimal pieces take these concerns to their limits.

So, by the early sixties this investigation of the materiality of painting, the nature of illusionism, and the assertion of the flatness of the picture plane became the dominant force that motivated radical American art. By the time Baer was working in New York there was a considerable amount of activity in this direction. An overview --- Rauschenberg had been painting his large reliefs with their unflat surfaces, attached objects and found materials since about 1955. Warhol's ideas concerned having other people doing the work and creating art in a factory, assembly-line manner. He also was using everyday commercial products as subjects in many of his screen-printed canvases. By repeating the image and reproducing objects out of their natural context, the paintings took on an iconographic quality. Jasper Johns had finished his American flag series and Targets by 1960.

By choosing an image that was inherently flat (an American flag) and making that object co-extensive

> with the shape and dimensions of the pictorial field, Johns eliminated the sense of shape on a field and achieved an unprecedented degree of flatness.[4]

Frank Stella had exhibited his black paintings at the Museum of Modern Art show in 1960. These pure black canvases were painted in a series, each using flat colour on a flat ground. "The solution I arrived at forces illusionistic space out of the painting at a constant rate by using a regulated pattern..."[5] So, by forcing all illusions of space out of the picture plane Stella demanded that the canvas be regarded as no more than its own physical presence -- "what you see is what you see" -- a new literalness that revived the old utopian dream of art breaking out ofits frame and overtaking life.

While individual pieces such as these, as well as several "policy" shows organized in New York in attempts to assimilate these similar viewpoints, show the crystallization of a movement in art, we find that Baer, although very much in the midst of all this activity, was at the same time professionally somewhat apart. She came to be regarded in most circles as an "artist's artist". The fact is that although since 1966 Baer's works have been exhibited in such museum shows as the Guggenheim's "Systematic Painting", "Documenta IV", and the Whitney Annual, until Lucy Lippard's article "Colour at the Edge" in May 1972, there had never been an article written about her. The paintings produced from 1962 through to the early '70's resulted in an impressive body of work assuring Baer's place as one of the more prominent figures in radical American painting. These paintings were executed during Minimal art's most triumphant

period, a time of great excitement and intellectual activity and a certain amount of success professionally for Baer. Still, her reputation was confined to an "underground" reputation at the best of times. This could be attributed to the fact that she was one of the few women working with obsessions that had mainly involved male artists, and, to the seemingly complex nature of the work itself. Although Baer disassociates herself from Femininst ideology (her work hasn't evolved from that viewpoint) she is ready to admit that a lot of artists took her work less seriously because she was a woman, which made her even more determined to produce good work. Still, she has hesitated to affiliate herself with feminist artist for fear of being forced into a "woman's ghetto". Baer is one of the elite who has always managed to compete within the mainstream of Fine Art culture. Another factor for her less than "commercial" popularity is the nature of the work itself. Her work tends to be "assaulting" in its presence; in a room her pieces demand contemplation and attention contrary to a lot of paintings which tend to blend in with their surroundings.

The paintings done between 1966 and 1967 were variations on her fist series, this time arranged in Triptych and Diptych groupings. What distinguishes these pieces from her earlier canvases is the lack of interlocking bands of contrasting colour within the upper black borders. These later paintings consist of bands of pure colour with an application of a final coat of paint without masking tape creating a less precise edge. Each of these paintings is identical in format, differing only in colour, shape, and size.

Baer's work is somewhat less systematic than some Minimal works which work within rigid, predetermined systems. The bands of pure colour are chosen without a definite system in mind; instead, the selection of colours is essentially an intuitive choice based on differences in value contrast.

> The luminosity of the colour in Baer's work prior to 1970 depends in very subtle and complex ways to contrast enhancement, the retinal phenomenon by which a given region looks brighter if its surroundings are dark. The colour line in these paintings appears brighter and more luminous than it physically is by virtue of being adjacent to a black band along one of its edges.[6]

A more complex variation of this colour enhancement occurs in the first "Double Bar" series of 1968, labelled as such because of the strong black "bars" of colour on wither side of the canvas. These diptych canvases are identical in form, the only differnec being the contrasting colour bands within the larger black bands (one green, the other blue). The inner colour line within the black bands is surrounded by black and the outer part of the line is bounded by white or light grey. This creates a greater degree of luminosity between the colour line surrounded by black than the other which borders the light grey or white, even though the paint colour is identical.

The Minimal painters were the first to create works which dealt exclusively with painting as an end in itself - emphasizing the material qualiteis of the work. Still, a number of artists were unable to accept the inherent illusionism of working within the physical limitations of the canvas. The desire to create three-dimensional, anti-illusionistic objects that

would exist in real space was the primary motivation behind the formation of Minimal sculpture. By the late sixties, Minimal painting and Minimal sculpture had become two separate genres with differing intentions, and the relationship between painting and sculpture a major issue. Previous to this "break" in ideology between painters and sculptors, artists working in the Minimal style had mainly exhibited together in shows emphasizing the Minimal esthetic of order and formalism. Group exhibitions such as "Ten" at the Dwan Gallery in New York and "Systematic Painting" at the Guggenheim, both in 1966, set in definite terms, the tenets of Minimalism at its best. These were "policy" shows promoting a movement,a certain type of work, and by 1970 it is what the art circles in New York were buying.

Artists like Robert Morris and Donald Judd, who began as painters, by the mid-sixties had directed all their energies towards sculpture and were to become quite critical of artists who continued to paint Minimal canvases. For them painting could never be successfully anti-illusionistic, so they denounced it totally.

Despite a lot of criticism from her contemporaries, Baer continued her investigations of Minimalist theory through painting. Robert Morris in an article written for Artforum ("Notes on Sculpture, Part 3", Artforum, Summer 1967) alleges an "inescapable, inherent illusionism" in painting and condemns the art of painting as an "antique mode". Published in Artforum's September issue, 1967, is Baer's rebuttal, stating that some Minimal paintings once they had discarded the illusion of dist-

ance and depth and emphasized flatness, became objects altogether and existed as objects rather than paintings.

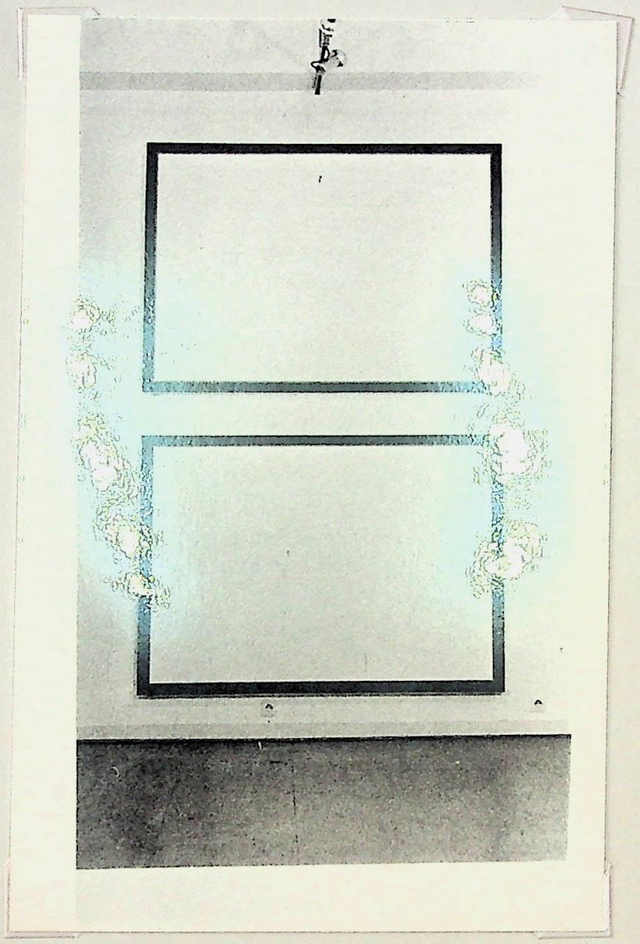
> Painters discarded the teleology of distance and pictorial depth when they discarded ground altogether, and paintings became objects altogether. This happened sometime before they were inflated into wall objects, up to ceiling objects and out to floor objects.[7]

Baer never accepted the opinions of Judd and Morris that painting was (1) a more or less a passive, illusionistic, two-illusionistic plane that waits for you to approach it, (2) a field for personal expression by the artist. She wanted her paintings to invade the viewer's sensibility in an almost aggressive manner, and at the same time to eliminate the driving force of personality from the event.

Baer was obsessed with creating pieces as pure and perfect in form and execution as possible. As a result her painting ideas remained virtually unchanged from the early to late sixties. Also, because of the delicate and precise quality of the pieces it took her a considerable amount of time to complete each painting. So, from 1962 to 1969 Baer worked within a single theme on paintings that often were painted and hung in groups so that the colours of the different inner borders were contingent upon each other in a very subtle way.

1969 marked the completion of these ideas for Baer. It was also an important year for her in terms of her career as she finally received a long awaited National Endowment for the Arts Grant and also began teaching at the School of Visual Arts

in New York. Her previous inability to obtain any sort of institutional recognition despite her important contribution to American painting had greatly frustrated Baer. She was angered at this obvious confrontation with art politics. Fortunately, the grant allowed her some time to sit back and consider the direction of her work and in what ways she could extend her ideas within painting which at this point needed consideration.



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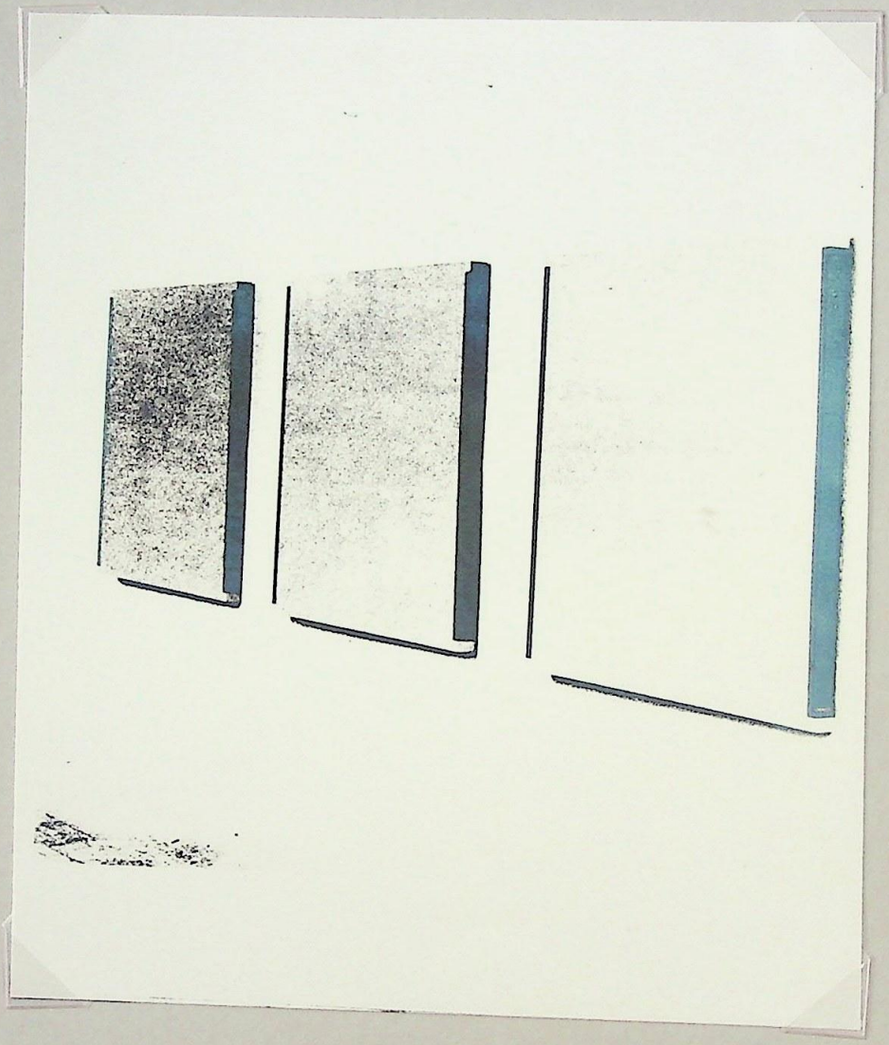

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CHAPTER II : TRANSITIONAL WORK (1969-1974)

About 1969 Baer began experiments which involved the placing of black bands on the extreme edges of the canvas and running them off the picture plane and around to the side of the stretcher. Contrary to her previous paintings which emphasized flatness with their impassive, symmetrical surfaces, these canvases had definite sculptural connotations and much more active surfaces. The "Double Bar" and "Wraparound" paintings that were a result of these experiments illustrate a distinct change in direction in Baer's work. Up to 1969 her paintings had essentially dealt with one particular theme -- the projection of structure as sequence; the result being not dynamic, but static, ritualistic, repetitive works. The work of several of Baer's contemporaries (Lewitt, Hesse, Darboven and others) was also involved in the externalization of logical procedure and had moved on to more conceptual concerns. Baer's new experiments led her to the reorganization of the picture plane from a flat, horizontal position to a three dimensional, sculptural canvas -- vertical canvases were hung four inches from the ground, horizontal canvases one inch -- built out from the wall. This shift in presentation resulted in the spectator playing a more active role in relation to each piece, as it was impossible to see each piece in entirety without moving around it.

> Baer felt she needed to accentuate the separate status of the flat picture plane against that of the wall and began to build out two inches from the stretcher to give the appearance of floating.[1]

These transitional works were an attempt to break from

the dogmatic limitations of pictorial structure that she had imposed on herself. Because of the freer, less restricting style and the brighter colours of the new pieces she found that the format took some getting used to. After destroying a lot of her initial experiments, Baer finally began to produce pieces that she was pleased with about 1969.

The "Double Bar" paintings predate slightly Baer's "Wrap-around" series, but by 1970 she was working on both pieces simultaneously. Her decision to move around the edges of the canvas results in a more obvious manipulation of space using the canvas itself, colour, and the positioning of the stretcher bars as instruments. In the second series of "Double Bar" paintings (the first series of "flat" canvases were done in 1968) either side of the canvas is bound by a black band that runs from the top of the canvas to the bottom without actually touching either end. These bars once moved to the extreme edges of the front plane are ultimately carried around the stretcher bars creating a three-dimensional effect. The physical differences between front and edge, paint and shadow are no longer clear because the bands of colour run off the canvas onto the side, and the shadow of the canvas against the floor is cast like a strip of colour onto the picture plane, becoming an integral part of the painting. The most impressive of this series is a Wraparound Triptych in Blue, Green and Lavender which Baer worked on continuously from 1969 - 1974.

Baer's final experiments in this direction were a set of horizontal and vertical paintings named after different types

of orchids (at this time Baer had a great interest in growing orchids and was a member of the American Orchid Society). The first of this set, H. Pandurata (the H or V beside each of the titles signifies horizontal or vertical in relation to the shape of the canvas) is a long horizontal canvas hung one inch from the floor. There is a small black rectangle in the upper left hand corner of the piece (its own lower edge is lined by grayed pink) which runs off the front plane and onto the sides of the canvas. Viewed on each different side it appears as a different shaped triangle. Next to this is an olive green triangle that becomes a rectangle on the top surface of the painting. A third triangle moves around an edge to become a black rectangle. Upon initial viewing these pieces seem quite different from Baer's more formal Minimal canvases; nonetheless, the feeling is much like her previous work most probably because of the precise curves and central areas of passive colour. If there is indeed a criticism to be made of these particular pieces, it is that Baer has taken on too many problems within one set of paintings. As soon as she addresses one particular issue in one canvas, the format of the next piece changes entirely.

The entire set consists of seven paintings - H. Pandurata (1970), V. Speculum(1970), H. Tenebrosa(1971), V. Lurida (1972), H. Orbitaster (1973), V. Eutopicus (1973), and H. Arcuata (1973). H. Arcuata is the strongest, most self-assured piece. It is obvious that with this piece Baer seems to have the most control and manipulates the paint in such a way that it works for her.

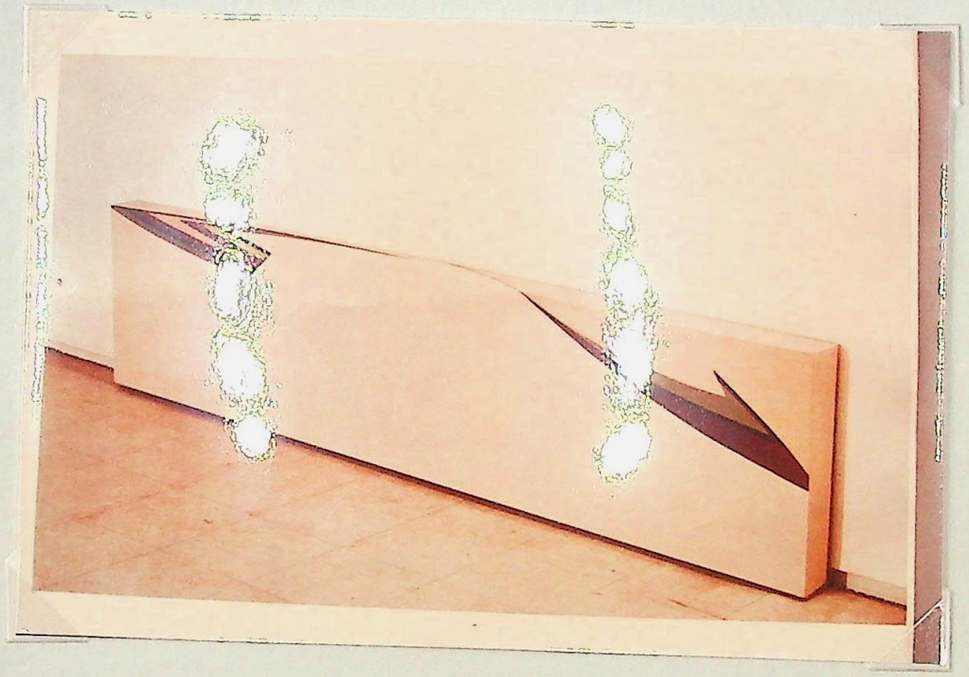
The swirling bands of different colour are consciously at odds and then reconciled --- bright and sharp in the upper left hand corner and dulled and less vibrant in the upper

right corner. As the bands of colour run off the frontal plane of the painting the brick red turns into an orange, the green grey becomes a bright green, each manipulating the light within the paint and in the installation. Each painting has many more colours than the eye can initially decipher since each colour is altered according to the colour beside it.

These intermediate sets of paintings are important in terms of Baer's total work as they represent a period of work in the process of changing. The "Wraparound" paintings have the look of "transitional" type pieces as they lack a definite direction, and are less clear in intention than her Minimal pieces. While her Minimal canvases exemplify a specific viewpoint and examine certain problems within painting (anti-illusionism, flatness, objectivity) the "Wraparound" canvases are somewhat uncertain in comparison. Because there is so much happening within one canvas the format is difficult to manage and Baer never deals with any one problem for too long. Instead, she moves right into another canvas and a whole new set of considerations. For this reason V. Speculum and V. Lurida are rather weak. The horizontal paintings of the group seem to be the strongest and work the best, H. Arcuata being the most successful.

From a personal standpoint it was a period of transition for Baer as well. By 1974 her marriage to Wellesley was in difficulty because of a conflict in careers. Baer's artistic career had flourished while Wellesley had less success. The political climate of America was becoming more and more intol-

erable --- the U.S.'s involvement in Vietnam, the election of President Nixon --- until Baer decided that she would like to leave and work within an entirely different context. Someone suggested Ireland with its tax-free status for artists and between 1974 and 1975 Baer visited Ireland numerous times (with addresses of friends given to her by Brian O'Doherty) to organize a house and studio in the country. In 1975 she moved to Swarmore, a thirty-six room castle in County Louth where she has lived and worked since.



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CHAPTER III: BAER, ROBBINS, AND THE NEW FIGURATIVE PAINTERS

> It is true we inherit a pictorial convention, but painting has challenged and reduced this inheritance, decade by decade, so that pictorial allusion inheres no more now in paint than in wallpaper.[1] Some recent paintings exist that are not pictures.

> On this occasion there is a concentration of work which has something to do with painting, some of it frankly antagonistic to that whole tradition, but most displaying a more complex ambivalence to its value, choosing to masquerade as painting in order to address the problem at its very centre.[2]

The above quotations relate to the changing face of painting in these times which has resulted in a myriad of different styles and approaches using the same media. By emphasizing the objectives behind dominant movements within painting, these quotations also illustrate chronologically the evolution of ideas in relation to painting during the last twenty-five years. The second quotation - from Thomas Lawson - outlines the attitudes of some recent figurative painters surfacing in New York - artists interested in working with figurative imagery in a "new" way and intent on returning a social content to their work. Baer and Robbins recent collaborations have been done with some aspects of this work in mind.

The first quotation - from Jo Baer - stresses the "Minimalist" conception of painting as a conveyor of pure ideas. This pursuit of ideas within painting resulted in all traces of pictorial allusion being stripped away, enabling paintings to exist not so much as "pictures" but as autonomous forms alluding to nothing but themselves.

Therein lies one of the problems central to Minimal theory and to a lot of the painting done under the guise of Modernism. Towards the end of what could be termed as Minimalism there seemed little real connection between what was going on in the art world and what was going on elsewhere. Minimalism became caught up in a narcissistic system, self-regarding, self-enclosed, and consequentially powerless. Contrary to Baer's point that "some paintings exist that are not pictures", it is impossible for a painting to exist separately from the history of the medium as historicity is inherent in the very nature of painting. Paintings therefore are always viewed as "pictures" in some sense as long as they adopt the format of painting. Even Baer's Minimal paintings are historical as they are contained within a rectangle and worked with oil paint (an artistic convention).

If we look at art history we see that most movements have a beginning and an end and no piece of art can be viewed outside history. In the case of Minimal painting problems became more and more self-referential until artists were to find themselves confined within their own limiting dictums which led to a deceleration in the power of the work. This is not to say that Baer's investigations were not necessary and powerful at some time (they were) but simply because of the nature of the work such an objective approach was bound to become entrapped within its own ideological construction. Baer realized this and has since moved on to other problems within painting.

A younger generation of artists also realized this and have been working on paintings which have rejected the precepts surrounding most Minimal and Conceptual works of art. Like

the "New Image" painters, Baer's most recent collaborations with Bruce Robbins have resulted in pieces primarily concerned with re-observing and re-using elements of figurative representation. By fragmenting depictions of various objects into a collection of dependent parts and re-assembling them as a whole, Baer and Robbins use figurative representation as a device for more formal concerns i.e. "the possibility of integrating figurative imagery in space without it becoming illustrative".[3] The reasons behind this seemingly extreme "change" in direction embodied in these most recent paintings can be attributed to several specific points, notably --

(1) The influence of the "New Image" or "Post-modern" painters, a group of younger artists who have evolved from and rejected the ideas of Conceptual and Minimal art and see the return to the use of figurative representation in a "new" way as a possible way forward. Baer and Robbins identify with this group in some respects.

(2) Baer's collaboration with Bruce Robbins.

(3) Her move waway from the mainstream in New York to the relative isolation of Ireland.

To understand the intentions behind Baer and Robbins's pieces it is necessary to look at their work with each of these points in mind. Firstly one might compare Baer and Robbins's collaborations with the recent figurative investigations being done by the "New Image" painters as there are definite similarities as well as definite differences between the two.

By the sixties and seventies the power of movements within Fine Art culture was becoming increasingly evident with the

increased patronization of artists by critics and galleries. Under this system art had become another saleable, marketable commodity with New York emerging as the leading centre of such activity. This also resulted in an artificial sort of situation where it could be argued that movements have had more of an influence on artists than real life. As Ingrid Sischly of Artforum said: ""The difference between generations of artists is now one year, one season, one cycle". [4]

Set against this background a new generation of artists began to emerge. They had evolved from a point of view shaped by the knowledge of Conceptual and Minimal art, the photographic image, and mass culture. Unwilling to act as an extension of the "Art Machine" [5], these artists began working figuratively with found imagery. The result has been that the work itself becomes a process of recycling -- it is both "old" and "new" in content.

To use "New Image" as a label to describe this type of work seems contradictory because the work represents an approach to the image as old. Artists like Baer and Robbins, Niel Jenny and Thomas Lawson use paint, recognizable imagery and canvas in a most conventional and unconventional manner. The "New Image" painters claim that newness is now a matter of recycling:-

> Without the spirit of escape or transcendence which the new represents, there is only the predictability of the cultural cycle, of image turnover. The new approach to the image is new because it is without the lustre of newness. It reflects the eye of the consumer who has seen these images before. [6]

The result has been the conscious production of rather awkward looking, heavily painted canvases that use the ever present images of consumerism and the media as their subject matter. At first sight, the paintings seem like rather inconsequential, amateurish attempts at figurative representation, but their executors claim they are much more than that. By using the devices of figurative representation in a consciously primitive manner these artists claim that they address the problem of painting and the media imaage at its very center by throwing the meaning of such images into confusion. These paintings are not celebrations of a return to a conventional oil and canvas format but rather antagonistic statements against that tradition, heralding perhaps the end of painting if anything by choosing to "masquerade" as paintings.

By the late seventies the New York galleries had shown a variety of regional forms of figurative representation: one year the Italian figurative painters like Francesco Clemente, the next the German Expressionists, and most recently the "New Image" artists from New York. It is rather confusing and difficult to separate these different manifiestations of figurative concerns because of the newness of the work and because at first glance many of the works by the Europeans seem quite similar to many of the works done by the New York artists. Nonetheless, the Americans have emphasized their differences and view their pieces as a counter-tendency against the European Expressionists mainly because of their concentration on the mediated, recycled, and social aspects of the imagery. To draw a comparison -- Francesco Clemente's paintings have evolved

from the style of traditional Italian painting to a very simple, expressive manner of drawing. His work is figurative, erotic, and sometimes grotesque in content. Nude figures are presented as isolated alienated individuals; the work is essentially allegorical in nature.

The quirky, rather eccentric canvases of Thomas Lawson are paintings of appropriated imagery. Lawson does not invent images, he confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant and poses as its interpreter, making the image become something else by adding another meaning:

> .....the result is only to make the pictures all the more picture-like, to fix forever in an elegant object our distance from the history that produced these pictures. This distance is all these pictures signify.[7]

Clemente's work seems to concentrate on two things - images, sometimes erotic, other times frightening and grotesque,light pastel colours with figures suspended within pure colour. Lawson's work is more objective, and has a less personal quality. Like the media he recycles he is neutral, merely allowing what is already there to show itself as alienating -- the images that surround our everyday lives. While Clemente's paintings always lead us back to the individual visions of a well-constituted artist's ego, Lawson's paintings deny personal references and question the very root of our cultural formation.

The collaborations of Baer and Robbins lie somewhere between these two approaches.

CHAPTER IV: BAER AND ROBBINS (1977 -)

I: Collaborative Work

At the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, England from October through to November 1977, Baer exhibited a retrospective collection of works including pieces from her Minimal period through to the "Wraparound" and "Double Bar" series. It was in Oxford, while working on the exhibition, that she met Bruce Robbins, a young British artist who up to that time had been working in a Conceptual vein on problems concerning image and language.

The textual and photographic elements in Robbins's works are most apparent between 1975 - 1977. These works present theoretical and ideological problems by paring down visual imagery to pure language. There is a great similarity between these pieces and the precise "Double Bar" canvases of Jo Baer done roughly around the same time. Both concentrate on specific formal problems - Robbins's works result in a rather complicated conceptual-linguistic style.

Before these pieces Robbins's works used a variety of different media - photography, drawing, text, in an installation format. Rather than concentrating on individual pieces Robbins created whole environments, his work never being strictly media-determined.

In 1977, the year Robbins first met Jo Baer, he had already begun to paint figuratively with oil and canvas. Both artists

met at a time when the direction of their respective works was undergoing a transition. For Baer, the retrospective exhibition represented the completion of a series of works and the end of a particulrar set of ideas. The "Wraparound" canvases had indicated that she was moving away from the strictly Minimal format but the direction that her new work was to take was still somewhat unclear. Her subsequent discussions with Robbins in Oxford clarified a lot of ideas that she had been considering in relation to the possibility of a new approach to figurative representation. She and Robbins began to realize that their intentions were quite similar. Both had evolved from a point of view shaped by the objective quality of Conceptual and Minimal ar, both had a substantial body of work behind them, both wanted to use figurative imagery and both felt that the possibilities of their previous works had reached an impasse of sorts.

After their meeting in Oxford, they began to collaborate. This collaboration to the present has resulted in several canvases and numerous large drawings in a figurative style. Unlike Baer, Bruce Robbins had dealt more extensively with figurative imagery in past works so that the new format these drawings were to adopt was not completely unfamiliar to him - he had always used conventional drawing in most of his installation pieces. Initially the combination of the two different styles within one work seemed to work very well and although the line and composition of each artist was different, both seemed to merge perfectly. After many experiments both artists

realized that it was primarily space they were dealing with - the relation between line and space, the tension and intensity it created, figures in space, content and space, etc.

One particularly interesting point which arises is the continuity of such a "change" in style. Due to the extremely objective nature of dominant movements in contemporary American art, works began to lack all humanistic impulse and all traces of personality. For this reason the change in "style" by Baer and Robbins does not seem so unusual or contradictory. By approaching pieces as problems in objective formalism to be solved in an almost systematic manner and by eliminating all personal references in relation to subject matter, the artists become neutral, merely allowing the work to reflect specific formal concerns or cultural formations.

Under this system it is difficult to term changes in style by Baer and Robbins as contradictory. It seems that for many contemporary artists seeing the imprint of popular culture in the self means to take a distanced vantagepoint from onself. Artists began to see themselves as culturally formed entities subject to the changes within culture and it seems that Baer has always regarded her work in this manner -

> Art which mirrors the present moves in a different way, from another cause and toward another effect. Its mainstream is the status quo. It is unidealized, displaying both the good and bad aspects of now.[1]

The "New Image" artists take an even more distanced and objective viewpoint, as they see themselves as totally reliant on

popular culture for their imagery. This is a new kind of objectivity grounded in the collective subjectivity of popular culture. It is quite obvious how such an attitude developed from the "impersonal" styles of Conceptual art and Minimalism. The importance of a "personal" artistic vision has seemed less and less important to artists in recent years. The artistic ego disappears almost completely amidst a rapid succession of "movements" and image turnover. The "New Image" artists question cultural myths by using them in their paintings -

> This work takes its cue from the observation that all cultural production is necessarily fictive and looks hard and long at the ideological myths embedded in that structure. These paintings use recognizable imagery, imagery with identifiable social meanings, but reproduce them from memory or photographs so as to throw these meanings into confusion.[2]

So, this imagery, appropriated from popular culture, becomes an important source of mythology and symbolism for an unusual, allegorical type art. Images taken from the media are presented in a different manner, within a different "aestheticized" context so as to question their significance.

> The appropriated image may be a film still, a photograph, a drawing, it is often already a reproduction. However, the manipulation to which these artists subject such images work to empty them of their resonance, their significance, their authorative claim to meaning.[3]

Baer and Robbins have done something similar by reducing figurative representation to its simplest form, pure line, and fragmented the imagery into a number of contingent parts. By

shearing away layer upon layer of detail until the representations are mere lines, enlarged and fragmented, the drawings become resolutely opaque. The floating, somewhat empty, images seem to represent their desire to capture the transitory, the ephemeral in a fixed image. For this reason the images become something more than figurative representations. The eye can envision the drawings in two ways: (1) as allegorical; figurative imagery represented as petrified, static landscapes; (2) as purely formal; imagery which transcends its own meaning, becoming pure form, fragments of images, and lines which are interrelated and intertwined when viewed as a "whole".

Although Baer and Robbins draw analogies between their work and the work of the "New Image" painters, there are some distinct differences. The points these works have in common is they they both utilize appropriated or found images and both have an allegorical content. Still, the found images of Baer and Robbins are objects that surround them rather than subjects with an overt social significance. Unlike the "New Image" painters, Baer and Robbins seem to work from a less politicized point of view and seem more concerned with specific formal problems within painting than with presenting works as "aestheticized diagrams of cultural landscapes". [4]

Contrary to the consciously murky, rather eccentric canvases of the "New Image" painters, Baer and Robbins's pieces are very precise, well executed and carefully presented. They seem to tread the thin line between producing works that are merely delicate, beautiful line drawings and works that solve

definite problems and make definite statements. The static rather displaced feeling of the fragmented images is what makes these works interesting.

Baer and Robbins's first exhibition of collaborative drawings is the result of four years' work and consists of roughly eight paintings and twelve drawings. The canvases use oils and the drawings are conté and crayon on paper. Upon initial viewing the arrangement of the exhibition has the quality of an installation because of the placement of the black and white drawings within a large white gallery space. The eye tends to regard the delicate black lines of the drawings as isolated in a huge void of white which creates a sort of floating sensation between the lines which seem to lie suspended in real space. The drawings are attached directly onto the walls without frames. The tension between the lines of the drawings and the white walls of the gallery seems to activate the space surrounding the works.

Baer says that the choice of her/Robbins's subject matter is of little importance and that they specifically use objects that they find around them -- their own bodies, whips, chairs, star charts... anything available. Like the "New Image" painters the material is usually drawn from memory. The paintings particularly seem to present stories; there is a suggestion of fantasy, a whiff of allegory, but because of the fragmentation of the imagery it is difficult to read a deliberate story into them, for they lack sufficient clues or are overloaded with too many of them. Because the imagery is fragmented and suspended

all over the canvas, they lack definite begginnings and ends.

The pursuit of naive or archetypal forms seems apparent in these paintings. Like the European Expressionists, the paintings have a detached, ritualistic feeling and a strange sort of erotic quality. Paradoxically, the eroticism of the imagery (the drawings illustrate parts of the male and female form - arms, breasts, buttocks...) is not dynamic but rather static, impotent, repetitive. Because of the use of identifiable objects the paintings suggest meaning but then defy meaning because of the allusiveness of the imagery. This as well as the fragmentation of the drawings gives them the quality of primitive cave paintings that must be deciphered rather than read.

It is difficult to talk about individual works because none of pieces are labelled, but one disconcerting quality of the exhibition is the inclusion of several additional canvases in a separate part of the gallery, one floor below the rest of the exhibition. This seems to break the continuity of the drawings and paintings on the main floor as one tends to view the main part of the show as a whole because of the way the way the pieces depend and relate to one another and the space around them. The paintings on the lower level are unstretched and pinned directly onto the wall. This is not a bad thing in itself but when viewed in succession with the carefully stretched and placed canvases on the main floor these look awkward and hurried. Compared to the delicate, fragmented line drawings and paintings in the rest of the exhibition these heavily

The illustrations on pages 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, and 47 are from the exhibition held at the Lisson Gallery, London, March 1982.

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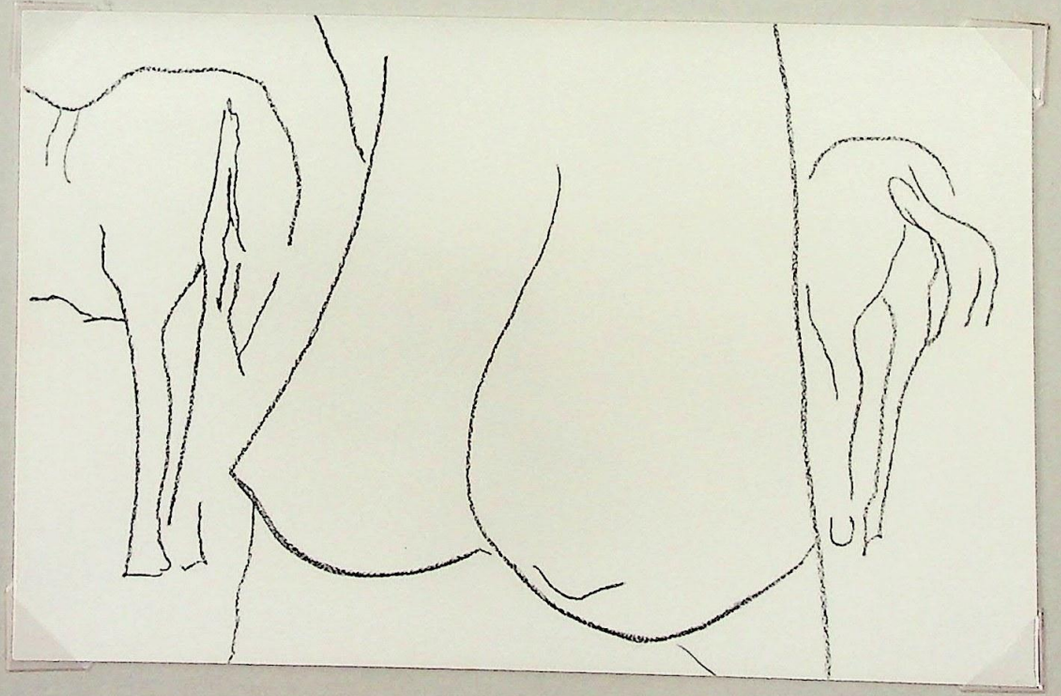

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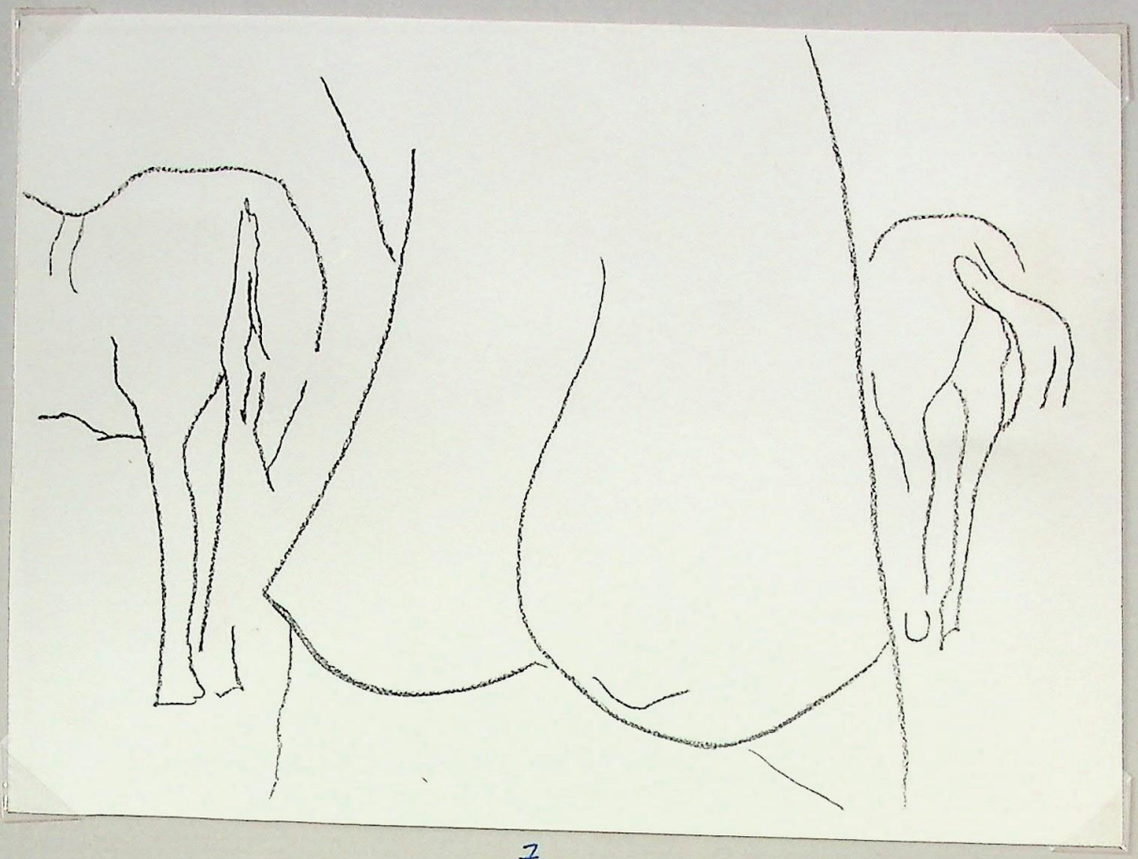

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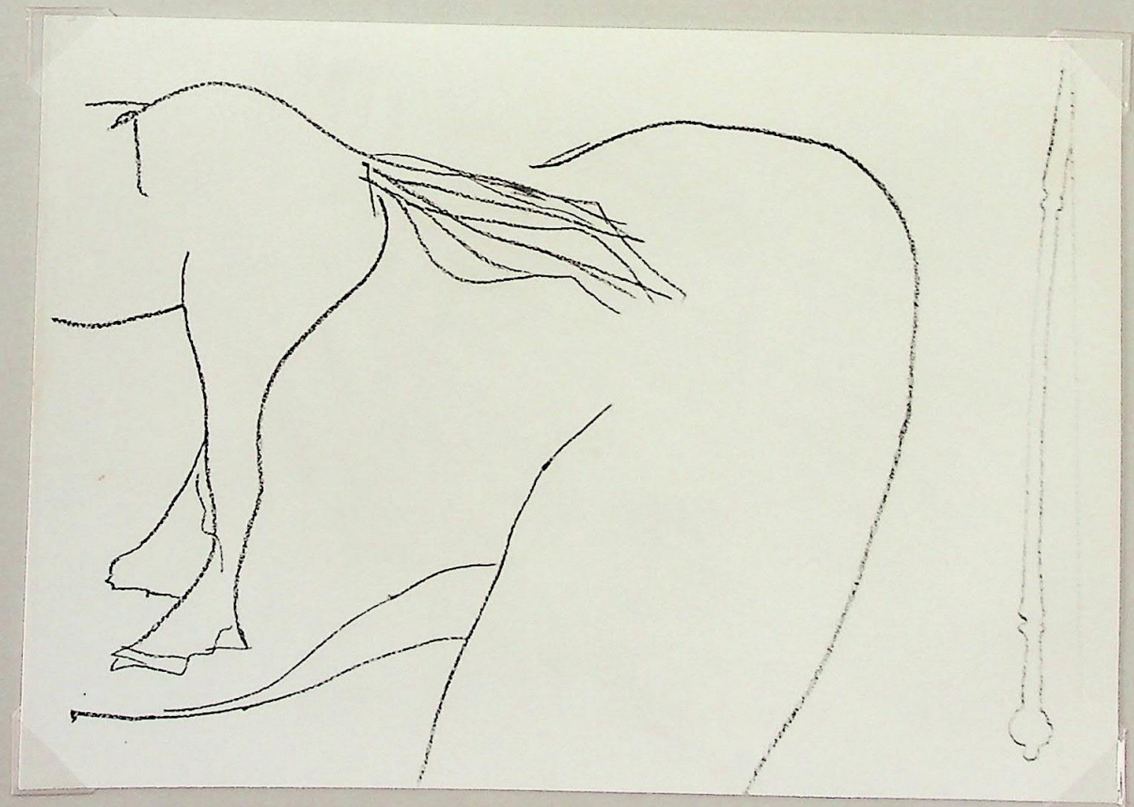

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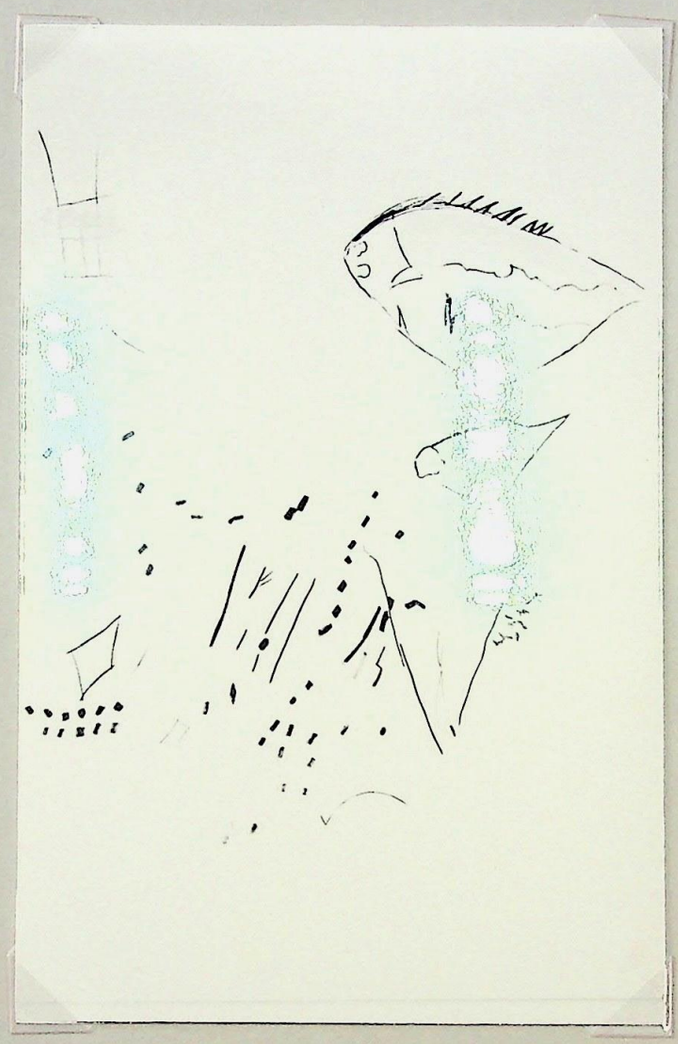

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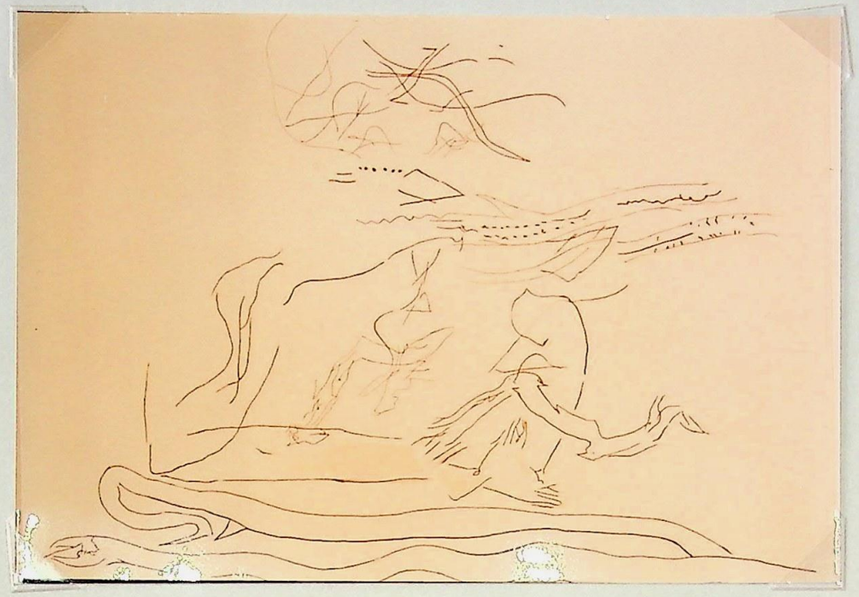

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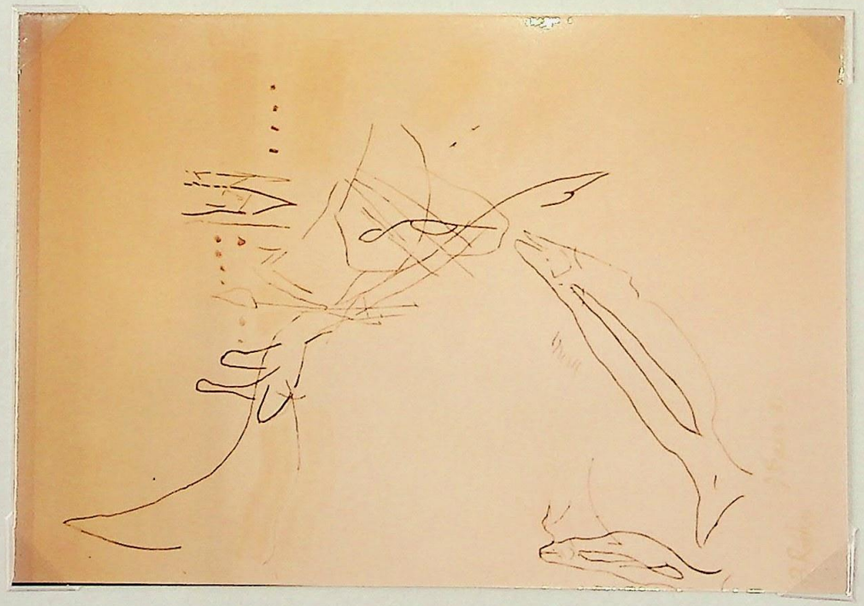

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worked paintings seem to present a whole new set of considerations. Ideally these pieces should be exhibited separately and developed further, for in the present context they seem far less dynamic.

II : Ireland

One of the reasons that Baer and Robbins's works do not easily fit into any category may be attributed to the fact that both she and Robbins work outside the "mainstream" and are less affected by current trends as they live and work in relative seclusion in Ardee, County Louth in Ireland. Indeed, since Baer's move to Ireland her work has a more introspective quality as if she was looking more deeply at what surrounds her by re-examining problems within painting. For Baer, Ardee is very much a retreat "between" worlds, Europe and America.

Baer came to Swarmore, a thirty-six room castle outside Ardee in 1975. For the first time she was living completely alone and she found being cut off in this huge house in a foreign country a rather difficult adjustment to make. During her first year in Ardee she realized that her life in New York had been so different -- continually surrounded by friends, well-established in art circles -- she found herself grieving for her success and life in New York but she was determined to stay on and make a life for herself in Ireland. Its unusual, untamed beauty suited her and she developed a passion for riding which she continues to do almost every day. For the

first while Baer found herself somewhat preoccupied by her isolation and alienation. Soon, however, she was organizing and reviewing past works for a retrospective exhibition which travelled from Oxford, to Belfast, on to Dublin, and finally to Eindhoven. The exhibition was the opening show for the newly constructed Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin, and was the subject of some controversy.

After initial associations with various artists in Dublin, Baer retreated once again to the seclusion of Swarmore shunning what she interpreted as the provincial pettiness of the Dublin art community. This decision was fuelled by the general disapproval in Dublin by critics and public that surrounded the Trinity exhibition. Her associations thereafter were with the Oliver Dowling Gallery which tends to show artists of a more international stature.

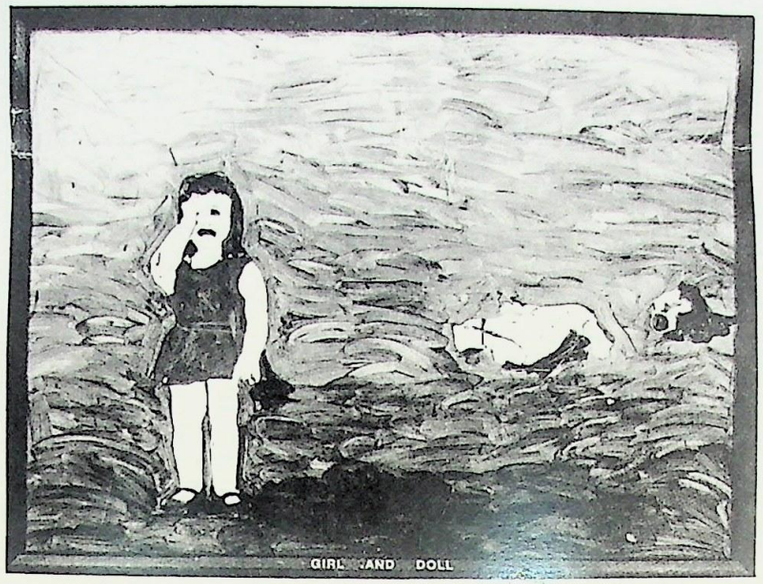
By 1977 Baer had met Robbins in Oxford and they began to live and work together, producing their first collaborative paintings that same year. The collaboration seemed to give Baer the incentive and support she needed and the completion of the initial paintings convinced Baer that together they were beginning to test new directions. For the most part she and Robbins work separately in different studios within the house, but both use similar subject matter and style. Some paintings are worked by both of them at the same time and all the drawings and canvases are signed by both artists.

Certainly Baer and Robbins's seclusion in Ardee accounts

for some of the difficulty one experiences in classifying their work. These paintings seem as much "between" styles as they are between worlds. Still, adhering dogmatically to a specific style or movement is of little importance to either artist.

Forging work in such isolation is a difficult task. The solitary worker loses the profit of example and discussion and is apt to make awkward experiments. One can easily lose sight of one's intentions. Working within the mainstream does, if anything, provide, the stimulus of suggestion, comparison, and emulation and although Baer and Robbins do pay visits to art centres (Dublin, London, New York...) it is not quite the same as working within these contexts. Not that good art cannot be produced away from other artists. It can, but usually with double the pains it would have cost if the work had been produced in a more stimulating environment.

Baer generally sets very high standards for herself. Her constant search for purity and perfection is almost a romantically classical notion but unlike a true romantic she distances herself somewhat from the work and is generally forward-looking in her approach. Creating works in the relative isolation of Ardee has been a difficult challenge for both Jo Baer and Bruce Robbins.



Steven: *Girl and Doll*, 1980

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Thomas Lawson: *Don't Hit Her Again, 1981*. Metro Pictures

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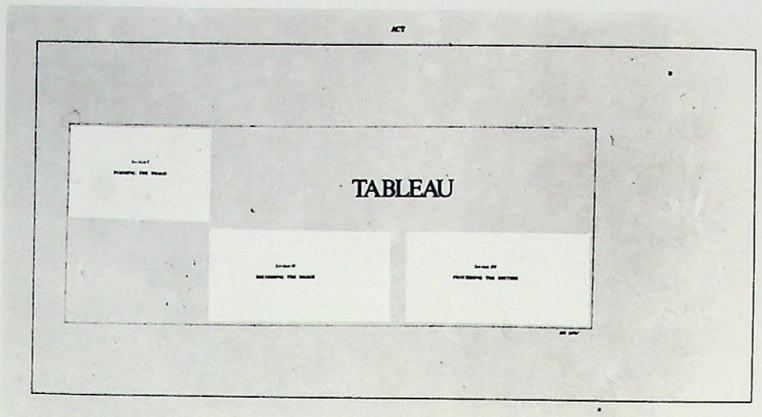

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The arrangement that I have come to in presenting these works is other than in presentations of past works, however, it should be considered in the light of these past presentations. All devices used in the past are present here and the arrangement of the interior should not be considered as without similar significance. Yet, am I begging too much to request the viewer to solve the significance of . . . the light on the desk . . . the consequences of size and situation of the location of where the work is hung . . . when these are seemingly arbitrary factors that are encountered whenever he steps forth to view any work. And is it too much to expect the casual viewer to unravel all the paradoxes and ambiguities, all the defamiliarisation and irony, which I present to him in the work: such as quoting a particular writer when it is intended that that writer's situation is perhaps analogous to my own? Maybe . . . yet I will answer with such a quote, as cryptic as it may be . . . "But is this solution within the grasp of all readers? No, sir, indeed it is not; and I fully expect all those who fail to grasp the hieroglyphics when they first read this line for themselves (and there will be a great many of them) to laugh at my commentary . . . and call me a visionary." ('Lettre sur les sourds et muets, a l'usage de seux qui entendent et qui parlent' Denis Diderot, 1751)

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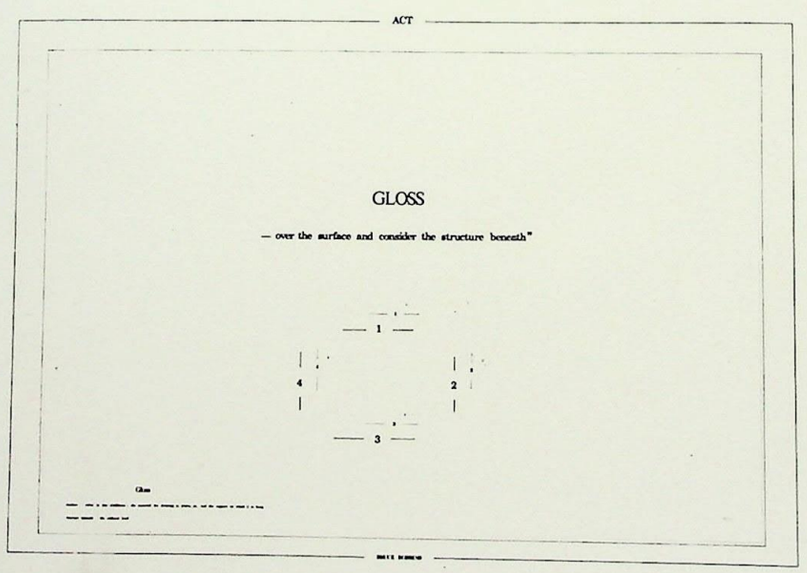

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CONCLUSION

> "The breaking of aesthetic habits has become such a a habit that it is no longer truly viable for many younger painters..."[1]

The formal and moral dilemnas posed by modern art's characteristically intense pursuit of novelty and advance are manifold. The return to figurative representation by artists can be interpreted as yet another rejective trend by those who have seen art for art's sake or the formalist strain of objective painting taken to its extreme. It can also be interpreted as an attempt to step outside the false and rigid classifications of movements so that artists can work outside of systems which confine them into one hard mold of logic.

Jo Baer, by exploring figurative concerns in a manner that is somewhat distant from similar investigations, has removed herself from the mainstream in which she was working successfully for a limited amount of time. The new work defies classification, but since Baer has previously worked contrary to the opinions of her contemporaries, the breaking of aesthetic traditions is no longer an issue with her.

Her willingness to deal with an approach that has not been fulfilled in personal terms and also the development of ideas that seem to involve a betrayal of previous concepts indicate that her position is a difficult one. She is unsure about the future of painting as an effective but works with precisely that medium; she has never drawn before but uses

drawing as a device in her most recent works; still, this work is as committed as her earlier paintings. She is constantly testing herself.

Like the "New Image" painters, Baer and Robbins do not see their paintings as a new traditionalism; they don't envisage the figurative format they have adopted as creating an audience any different from their previous works. Instead they see their investigations as a new approach to figurative concerns, using conventional methods. Because of the newness of this work it is difficult as yet to decide on its effectiveness, but Baer and Robbins are confident that these paintings may be their most successful.

NOTES

Chapter I: The Early Years (1929 - 1968)

1. Barbara Haskell, Jo Baer (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1975), p. 6.

2. Ibid., p. 6.

3. Donald Judd, Complete Writings, 1959 - 1975 (Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), p. 63.

4. Lucy Lippard, Eva Hesse (New York: New York University Press, 1976), p. 136.

5. Cited by Rosetta Brookes, "Editorial", ZG, no. 2 (1980), p. 21.

6. Barbara Haskell, op. cit., p.13.

7. Jo Baer, "Letter", Artforum, Vol. 6,(Sept. 1967), p.6.

Chapter II: Transitional Work (1969 - 1974)

1.David Elliot,Jo Baer: Paintings,1962 - 1974 (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1977), p. 10.

Chapter III: Baer, Robbins, and the New Figurative Painters

1. Jo Baer, "Letter", Artforum, Vol. 6, (Sept. 1967), p.5.

2. Thomas Lawson, "Too Good to be True", Realife Magazine Vol. 1 (Autumn 1981), p.5.

3. Author's interview with Jo Baer and Bruce Robbins, Feb. 17, 1982.

4. Rosetta Brookes, "The Art Machine", ZG, No. 3 (1981), p.1.

5. Ibid., p.3.

6. Ibid., p.3.

7. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures", October, Vol. 8 (Spring 1975), p. 85.

Chapter IV: Baer and Robbins (1977 -)

1. Jo Baer, "Letter", Artforum, Vol. 6 (Sept. 1967), p.5.

2. Thomas Lawson, "Too Good to be True", Realife Magazine, Vol. 1 (Autumn 1981), p. 4.

3. Cragi Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism", October, Vol. 12 (Spring 1980), p. 69.

4. Malcolm Kassellmann, "Paintings are more than a Medal of Honour", Realife Magazine, Vol. 1 (Autumn 1981), p. 8.

Conclusion

1. Gene Swenson, "An Impure Situation (New York and Philadelphia Letter", Art International, Vol. X, No. 5 (May 1966), p.17.

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