THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

EXIT THE FIGURE?

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ILLUSTRATIONS

I approached this subject of the figure, as a historical and contemporary issue in order to clarify for myself, its real position in art. The area involved is very vast but I have managed to narrow down the important issues in which it was involved, by sticking to the major movements.

I began by developing the relationship of the figure to early concepts of importance from Courbet to Miro, the intervening years of Abstraction and Conceptualism and finally its importance in the contemporary area of the 80s.

Being a painting student, the dialogue which surrounds the figure today is particularily important, as it involves me, how I formulate my own work and on what evaluative criteria I might use to build my own reasons round my work.

'Exit the Figure?' is a theme which has allowed me to question and answer, if the homo sapien can live without seeing himself expressed in some image in which he reflects the spiritual etnos of his own period.

Gustave Courbet. The Bathers 1853

As far back as Courbet it is possible to see that the figure in art has been a controversial issue. Guichard in his 'Doctrines de G. Courbet' (1862) wrote about Courbet's bathers:

> "The irritation got to the point that the police commiss-
> ioner of the Quarter wanted to drive it out of the ex-
> hibition." 1

Courbet had in effect struck a chord which injured the public taste, realism in art. It is of interest to note that Delacroix was disquieted and yet fascinated by the Bathers when he too commented on a return visit to the painting:

> "It is the cruel reality of things I flee when I take refuge
> in the creations of art." 2

It is significant to say that with Courbet, the figure had taken on issue which became subservient to a painterly concept, or idea. This subservience of the figure would continue throughout the historical ladder of art move-ments, even at times if it is to be negated from the canvas.

Guillaume Appolinaire referred in his book 'The Cubist Painters' published in 1913 that:

> "Cezanne's last paintings and his watercolours appertain
> to Cubism, but Courbet is the father of the new painters." 3

The essential aspect of Courbet was his matter-of-fact approach to painting which caused him to reject conventional ideas of beauty, subject and form. The solid tangible reality of things being an important criteria in the outcome of a work.

When the impressionists arrived with their probing questions of naturalism some time later, the fascination with nuances of tonal light
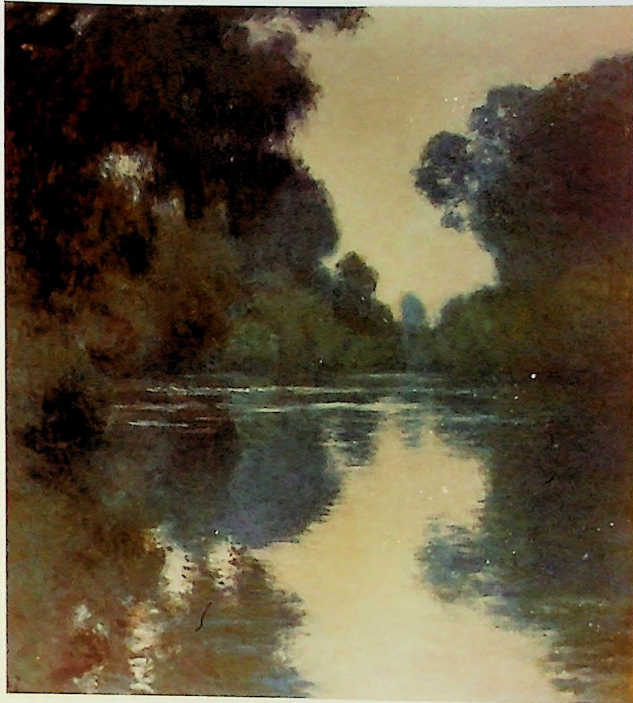
Claude Monet. MORNING ON the seine 1897

soon caused them to lose sight of the more solid aspects of reality, and of Courbet.

Impressionism brought the tradition of creating illusion to an end and so the only possible subject for painting seemed to be light. However it is interesting to note just how close Monet was to abstraction when one looks at a painting of his done in 1897 - Morning on the Seine . The shapes and forms together with very flat colouration, barely represent an association with the theme. The lack of figuration only stresses the point, and it can be said that figuration plays a minimal role in Monet's later work in general. Monet's concern is with light and how best to represent it.

Many artists could not accept that the image of man should be dissolved in a tissue of colour and thus, the post-impressionist reaction reasserted the need for a picture to have both a supporting formal structure and a human content. These post-impressionists had learned that the work of their predecessors used colour as an ambivilent element which contributed actively to producing an illusion of reality, but could also function independently. So it was artists like Van Gogh, Seurat and Gauguin who refused to recognise the eye as the sole instrument of understanding. They made the eye subservient to imagination and reduced the descriptive role of colour in order to explore its structural as well as innate expressive and symbolic possibilities. Therefore by 1890, painters were generally more concerned about expressing an idea than with trying to represent what the world around them looked like. The figure was kept and used by the artists, not because they had anything to say about the figure itself, but if only to manipulate it as a compositional element around which they would explore painterly possibilities. It is clear that by the end

Paul Cézanne . Man smoking Pipe . 1895

Pablo Picasso . Les Demoisseles 1907

of impressionism, the figure was beginning to play a subservient role to the shifting tide of concepts within painting.

It wasn't long before artists discovered that abandoning the device of one point linear perspective, led to pictorial incoherence, because it removed the keystone of the structure which held the illusion together. Without indulging in eye-fooling illusion, Cezanne laboured in search of a solution which gives equal value to the mind and to the eye, to a permanent side of reality, to volume and flatness, to light effects and to the structure of space. Using colour alone and avoiding linear definition. Yet in order to reconcile his awareness with depth and roundness with his desire to preserve the flatness of the picture surface as a reality, Cezanne resorted to changes of perspective within the picture itself. The visible order of nature being transformed by the invented procedures of art. Cezanne painted landscape, still life and interiors with people while developing a language of tangible reality around them. In the painting Man Smoking a Pipe , it is clear that the portrait of the man himself is of little concern to Cezanne. The concern emanating from the picture is a cool detachment from the subject, thus making us aware of the spacial qualities, treatment of colour tones and the play on distorted perspectives. The tonal emphasis placed on the table and hanging curtain are treated the same way for the figure, thus creating a flatness with no depth. The figure becomes a mere compositional element in an invented art procedure.

By 1907, Cezanne's stylistic investigations with the language of paint prompted Picasso to paint Les Demoiselles d'Avignon. This painting more than any other emphasized the aggressive break with all other painting at the time. Picasso had gone further than Cezanne with his simplif-
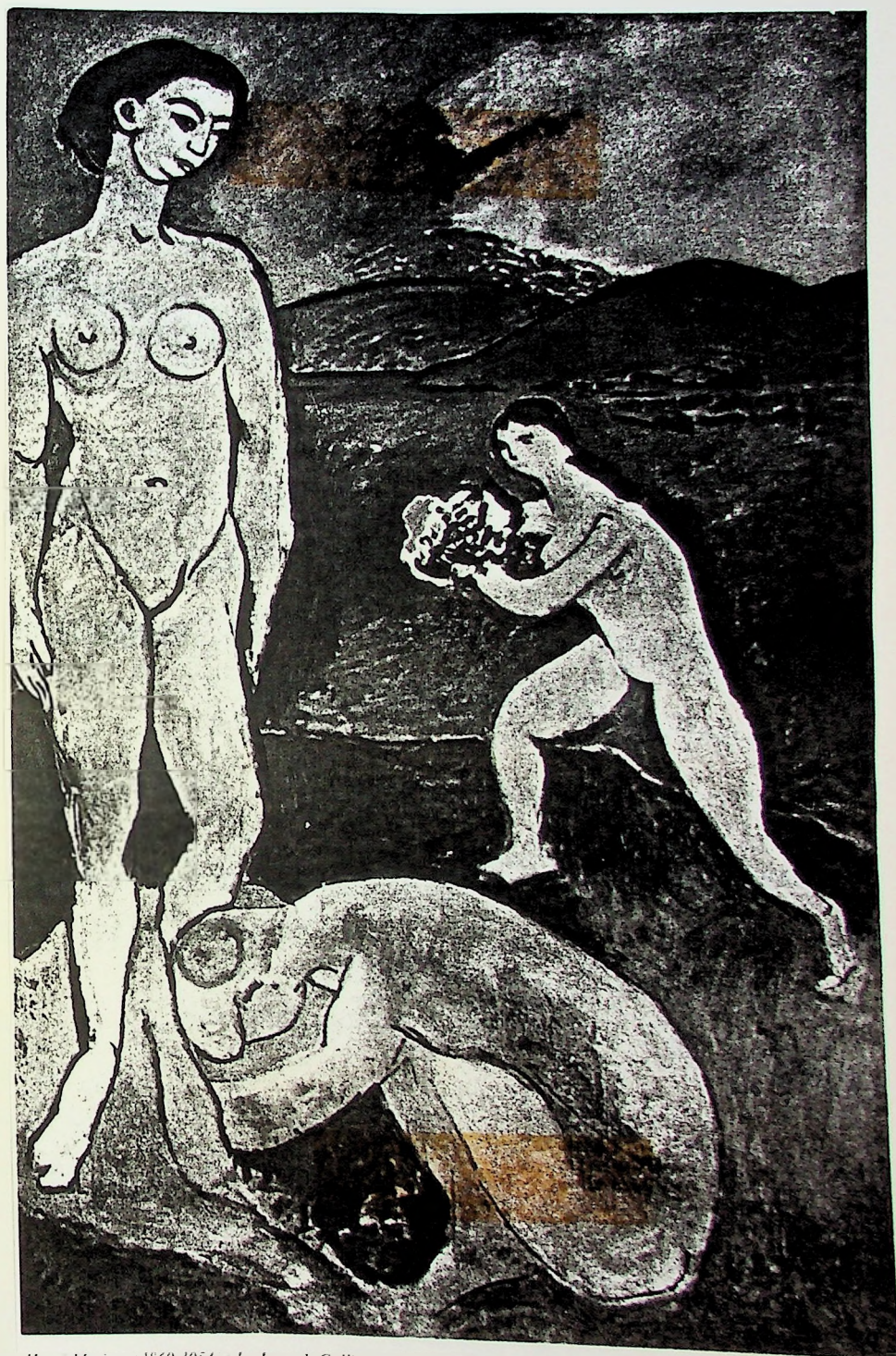
Henri Matisse (1869-1954). Le Luxe I, Collioure, 1907. Oil.

ications and wholly new treatment of space, perspective and colouristic
logic. This rendering of five women within the painting show how strong
his departure from illusion had gone, to a point of extreme primitiveness.
The five figures have been reduced to stylistic invention by negating the
value of perspective and the deployment of a flat structural surface.
The historical significance of the Demoiselles shows that never before
has the figure been treated with such generalization where the convention-
al system of depicting anatomy has been irrevocably distorted as sacrifice
to the total structure of the painting.

In 1907, Matisse was also concerned about representing volume on
a flat surface which is evident by his painting Le Luxe I . Matisse
presents his method of solving the question of flatness by reducing
each form to a surface defined by a brushstroke, generalises the figures
with clumsy outline and creates little or none of the tonal qualities
used to depict perspective. But the overlapping facets which break up
the volume in Les Demoiselles create a threshold of invention which
would take Picasso to a further point of departure, Cubism.

What separated Matisse from Picasso was their opposite concerns.
For Matisse it was colour and pleasurable sensations while Picasso was
more interested in the solid tangible reality of things. These opposite
concerns are reflected in how they painted their relative subject matter,
not essentially how they painted the figure.

Cubism, the new vision and pictorial language was developed by
Picasso and Braque and later by Gris, with a revision of the accepted
ways of handling each of the pictorial elements - colour, form, space
and light and finally by substituting new procedures of their own. The

George BRAQUE . Female nude 1907-8

George BRAQUE . Female NUde . 1909

aim was to represent things more literally and to recapture the direct
unsophisticated approach to reality of a primitive artist. The effect
of seeing Les Demoiselles inspired Braque to paint a nude in 1907 which
shows an obvious indebtedness to Picasso. In an interview about the nude,
Braque states that:

> "it was necessary to draw three figures to portray every
>
> physical aspect of a woman, just as a house must be drawn
>
> in plan, elevation and section." 4

The Cubist idea beginning to take shape in Braque's mind by his twisting
and spreading of the figure outwards to escape from a simple profile
view. The figure is also projected from and not absorbed into the back-
ground while the handling of light is deliberately inconsistent.

By 1909-10, Picasso and Braque had taken their pictorial language
to an extreme never before realised in painting. Works in which objects
and space are woven in an elaborate arrangement of planes and facets.
Figures as well as objects were submitted to this process of abstraction
and lost their individuality. For the first time in the history of
painting, the figure had visibly disappeared not from painting, but from
logical comprehension. To the untrained eye (which would be most of the
public), there is difficulty in reading the work of Picasso's Clarinet
Figure, and Braques Female Nude. However it is possible to interpret
such work by understanding that the lines and planes represent different
features and parts of the body or objects, and that angles though they
correspond with natural facts are primarily dictated by spacial considerat-
ions and pictorial necessity. This would be called the high Cubist
period where the frontiers of total abstraction were seemingly possible
yet there is a strength of will to keep in touch with reality by the two
Cubist painters so that their paintings shouldn't become wholly abstract or
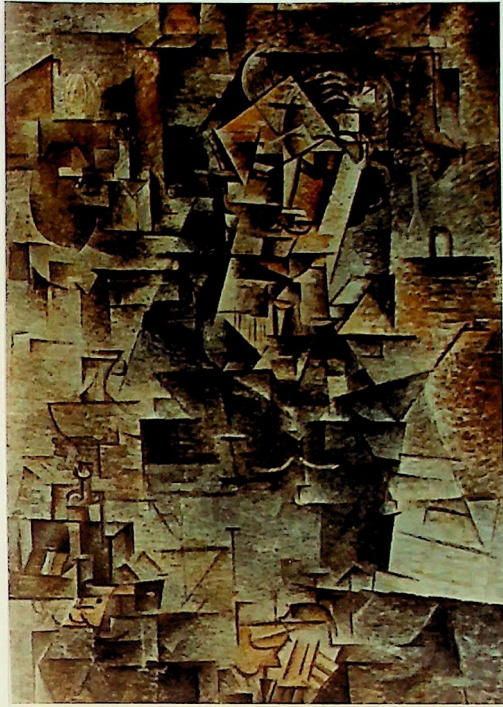
Pablo Picasso. Portrait of Kahnweiler 1910

non-figurative. They devised a system of abbreviated signs which they incorporated into their work, like hieroglyphs to make particular features identifiable and provide clues to the build-up of the composition as a whole. Thus in the Portrait of Kahnweiler, Picasso was at pains to elucidate his planar structure by emphasising details such as eyes, nose, well brushed hair and watch chain. The concept of total abstraction would lie elsewhere yet by subordinating the figure and all other factors, to a painterly concept, the pursuit of tangible reality, the expression of man to his environment would become a negated factor. To quote Braque, its aim was-

> "not to try and reconstitute an anecdotal fact but
>
> to constitute a pictorial fact." 5

Perhaps one of the greatest achievements in realising 'pictorial fact' was the sense of freedom which artists discovered, that opened their aesthetic to invention and manipulation.

While Picasso and Braque had successfully planted the roots of Cubism in Paris, another artist with eastern origins had been working in Munich around the same period, Wassily Kandinsky.

In reminiscences, Kandinsky criticized his earlier attempts at landscapes (c.1900) as 'unsuccessful attempts to capture the energy of nature'. 6 These early works are usually simple in design with a heavy emphasis on the thickness of paint, often it's the bold richness of colour which carries the attention. Kandinsky was right when he admits they were poor attempts at something in the vein of Van Gogh. The expressive content in a Van Gogh simply doesn't exist when compared to the clotted static ef fect of Kandinsky's earlier painting.

But by 1911, Kandinsky has emerged with some of the best works

Wassily Kandinsky. Composition IV. 1911

Wassily Kandinsky. Composition VII. 1913

painted within the period prior to world war 1. In this period his work
draws the different strands of his earlier work together so that a sudden
dynamic reorganisation of the elements of which it was composed take place .
Colour and form assume an accelerated quality; landscape takes on a quality
of movement rather than of space or light. The overworked, contrived
effect of his earlier landscapes have gone and are replaced by an ease
of execution, a fluency of colour and later, line, which give the work
a quality of exhilaration. He had realised that for him the human figure
 was in no way a representation but a symbol of certain qualities and
facets of human character and landscape, a symbol of elemental forces
that maybe used either to help or hinder human endeavour. In his reminis-
cences of the period, Kandinsky says:

>"Unconsciously the object as an evitable element of the
>picture was discredited." 7

Thus by discrediting the object, whether it be the figure or
elements in the landscape, Kandinsky barely allures to anything that might
be described as representational and again to the untrained eye, one
has to 'look for' the reference material in paintings like Composition IV.
Kandinsky admits to horses, castle , sky, spears and war elements in the
painting. He suggests these by using a formula of simple line in black
and by reducing the shapes to a mere suggestion of their true architectual
value. Thus the horse rider is described by a black half circle with a
red dot for a head and two figures in white to the right of the painting
are treated as oblong sausage shapes with clumsy contours for heads. In
reminiscences he wrote:

>"The splendour of colour in a painting must powerfully
>attract the viewer, and at the same time it must hide
>the underlying content." 8

For Picasso and the Cubists, the pursuit of the tangible reality
of things created a concept and approach to painting which defined the
very act of painting by breaking down the structural components of
figure and objects and re-inventing by assembling a new flat dimension.
Kandinsky on the other hand sought the absolute by referring to the
allegorical and using colour to define 'the spiritual in art' through
sensation of the retina. The allegorical would have no importance except
as reference point where he could construct forms within which he could
hang his compositional structure.

Kandinsky stands alone when we think of a pre-1914 artist seeking
to find the absolute within the range of free abstraction. The 'ism'
of the period was definitely cubism, stretching across Europe where artists
hoped to find a point of departure from the representational. No where it
seems, can there be found another artist engaged in the same pursuit as
Kandinsky. By 1913 Kandinsky completed Composition VII, which stresses
his conviction about the abstract. A great volume of colour planes pushing
and pulling, reds against yellows and blues against white, the amount of
detail too great to define. But finally gone is the representational
world, the figure no where in sight, nor for that matter any other def-
inable objects to be described. Only the tumultous not amorphous forms,
explosive and informal, exist. It is a subjective painting relatingto
nothing except to itself. The words of Werner Heisenberg seem appropriate
when we think of such a work:

> "It may not be an over simplification to state that man
> on this earth, for the first time in history, is faced
> only by himself." 9

It would be wrong however to suggest that painting prior to World

Ludwig Kirchner. Street, Berlin 1913

George Groz. Small Cafe 1922-24

War I negated traditional values of representation altogether. Many fine
painters continued to find a source of reference using the figure, part-
icularly the German Expressionist of Berlin. Unlike the Cubists who sought
a new language upon which to construct an interpretation of vision, the
Germans confined themselves to expressing the relationship of man to his
environment often using the allegorical which went hand in hand with bold
expressive painterly techniques. The notables involved were Kirchner,
Emil Nolde, Oskar Kokoska and Ludwig Meidner while only after the war,
Grosz like Beckmann achieving a strong potential force within the style.

However it was World War I which brought a critical juncture to the
features of traditional Expressionism in Germany. Beckmann, Dix, Grosz,
Heckel and Oskar Kokoshka, who was wounded on the russian front, were all
enlisted for the war. When they returned, it was to find a more sombre
and critical attitude to expressionism. The original enthusiasm for the
'shock effect of the unusual' or the uncritical attitude towards the 'cosmic
view of the world' had waned. The delight in originality and revolutionary
ideas were completely doused by the appalling experiences undergone by artists
who hoped their work would be instrumental in bringing the war machinery
to an end. It seemed as if what mattered most would not be the aesthetic
problems like those of Picasso or Kandinsky but the semblance of some social
reality. George Grosz wrote that art was not a matter of aesthetics at all.

> "Drawing must be subordinated to a sense of social purpose
> and in the last analysis more aesthetically beautiful than
> an abstract, highly individual representation of some
> obscure mystical experience." [10]

The figure in art would be treated with a certain angst, using techniques
of sharp severity to stress the 'human condition of man' in a changing
society where he is subservient to the machine and the political order of
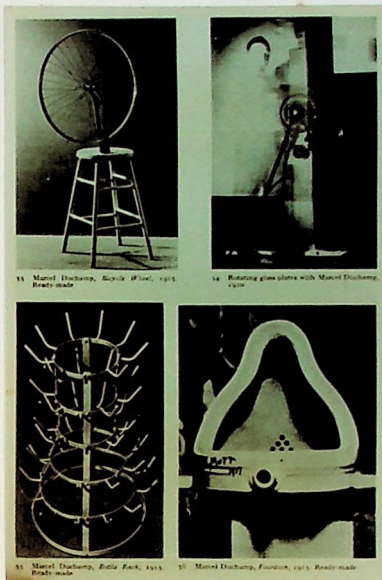
MARcel Duchamp. READymADes 197ß-20

the day.

Against this backdrop of disillusion in art, Dada was born in 1917.
Dada was the first movement which ideologically was anti rational art
because the artists believed it to be a viable way to attack a society
and culture that had lost its way. All art, they believed, was a product
and part of bourgeois values. Thus to protest, they used art as a device
and attacked art attitudes and art itself. However, it was more literary
and musical than anything else. Where it manifested itself in the fine
arts can be seen in the work of Marcel Duchamp who used 'ready-mades'.

'Ready-mades' were sculptural assemblages pieced together or some-
times even 'found objects' which existed by themselves. Thus a bicycle
wheel mounted on a stool or a snow shovel standing against a wall could
in their opinions exist as art. Anti the bourgeois idea of how things
should be, perhaps, but anti- creativity it wasn't. The figure in Dada
art could never be an issue because of its bourgeois valuation.
Instead collage would be manipulated to a degree beyond the vision of the
Cubists. Kurt Schwitters, Duchamp and Raoul Housman used this method
of working in order to reveal, map and label the components of their
surrounding culture. The figure in art found itself being subordinated
withing the context of conceptual values, to a point of absurdity. Collag-
ing photographs of people onto a page sufficed as art.

Dada was soon to burn itself out but some of its absurdity would
find its way into another movement - Surrealism. Without Dada there could
have been no Surrealism. The poets and painters who gathered under the
banner of this movement claimed to be 'specialists in revolution',

protesting against intellectual malpractice. They affirmed the rights of
the dream, of love, of awareness and they joined in encouraging the mind
to be open to wild encounters. Instead of jeering the public, they sought
its co-operation. Writing, painting and sculpture became aspects of one
single creativity - that of calling existence into question. On the Fine
Arts, Andre Breton said;

> "If the plastic arts are to meet the need for a complete
> revision of real values, a need on which all minds today
> are agreed, they must therefore either seek a purely int-
> erior model or cease to exist." 11

Those who took up the challenge were Max Ernst, Andre Masson, Miro, Arp,
Man Ray and Tanguy. The figure now found itself manifested in an area
where it populated dream-like worlds. Often it was distorted as in the
works of Kali, Ernst and Masson, while at the same   time appearing to
communicate the unidentical world of the sub-conscious, endorsing psychic
fears and make believe, eroticism and cruelty.

In order to suggest the 'interior model' in their work, the Surreal-
ist artists used the figure extensively. For twenty years the Surrealist
artists would exploit with passion the fantastic and imaginary worlds
which could remind us of Bosch-like themes. It was an 'ism' which relied
heavily on the exaggerated and eccentric use of the figure. Because, by
using the figure they could relate the irrational nature of man's 'dark
side' to a public who were quite pleased with their rational view of the
world. Each of the artists involved would treat their work with the same
desire to invent and distort so thatat times imaginary amorphous worlds
would exist while others would rely on bizarre figurative content which
could have been the fantasies of 14th century sailors. But nowhere more
playful and whimsical did painting exist than in the work of Miro whose

Joan Miro. Head of woman 1938

work of the period suggests wild distracted games scattered on monochrome
backgrounds. He made poem pictures, picture objects, collage drawings
and wooden constructions. The use of child-like techniques in his paintings
using flat shapes and linear simplicity would bring him nearer abstraction
than any of the surrealist painters.

By 1940, it is clear that most art movements from impressionism onwards
had expressed the attitude of investigating the visual order of things. By
breaking the rules of perception and manipulating the imagination, it was
possible to borrow from each successive 'ism' and create a new visual aesth-
etic. With each new concept of ideas the figure would become subordinate
to play either a passive or active role as was the case in the German
Expressionists. Outside of movements, individualists would continue to use
the figure in their work as in the case of Soutine, the English painter Burra,
or the American Hopper. It seemed as if the figure would always remain
within the context of style,in the vanguard of art for man to re-assert his
own existence until the Americans started to exploit a concept begun by
Kandinsky, the Abstract.

Footnotes.

1
The Life and Times of Gustave Courbet, Jack Lindsay 1973.

2
Ibid.

3
The Cubist Epoch, Douglas Cooper 1971.

4
Ibid.

5
Ibid.

6
Kandinsky - The Language of the Eye. Paul Overy, 1969.

7
Ibid.

8
Ibid.

9
Ibid.

10
Expressionism and Fauvism. Kristian Sotriffer, 1972.

11
Surrealists and Surrealism, 1919-1939. Gaeten Pican.

Born out of a war-torn Europe and the unfettered freedom of America came Abstract Expressionism, Action Painting and Gestural Realism, providing the dynamics that placed the new American art in the vanguard of western art. The closing down of Nazi Europe and the suppression of creative art and intellect caused a high degree of radically inclined refugee artists to emigrate to the United States where they took up positions and helped to provide a stimulus of ideas. By 1950 a majority of painters on both sides of the Atlantic were producing works either abstract, expressionistic or combining both. The well known painters of repute who were residing there were Joseff Albers, Hans Hofmann, Piet Mondrian, Marcel Duchamp, Chagall, Leger, Moholy Nagy.

For the first time in American history, young painters could study and observe Europe's leading artists on their own soil, instead of making the inevitable trip to Berlin or Paris. This meant that they could retain their own identities and relate the attitudes and theories of the Europeans to their own experience and environment.

The 'automatic surrealist' method of working was most influential at the time, but it was not quite so simple as that. The world war II holocaust had left its mark on countless numbers of people. It was a time for rebuilding a whole new social order and nowhere more than in the arts. Free abstraction would provide the area to rebuild a structure in the plastic arts.

Previous to its arrival in America, Surrealist painting had divided itself into figurative and semi-abstract. On one hand there was Magritte who used readily recognisable images, figures and words based on the absurd

-18-

Gorky. The Calendars. 1946

Jackson Pollock. Totem Lesson 1944

which he found in everyday life, or Dali with his hand coloured photographs of the subconscious, while on the other hand there was the biomorphic paintings of Masson, Miro, Tanguy and Matta.

In that biomorphic painting combined various forms in evocative organic wholes, it still was associated with the real world; for the young New York painters it was a way to the subconscious and to themselves. Although Picasso was respected by the young members of the American Abstract Artists, it was rather the late Cubist geometry of Leger and Mondrian that the majority chose as their models. In the meantime, a few of the most gifted young painters were already beginning to rebel against the dryness and rigidity of geometric art. Gorky, de Kooning and Pollock were never attracted by non-objective or purist art and went straight to Picasso himself.

It is Gorky to whom one goes for a forged link between surrealistic and abstract form. Earlier in his career he worked in a cubistic manner and particularily admired Cezanne and Picasso but by the thirties, he was already becoming influenced by Tanguy and Miro. What is different about Gorky's surrealist paintings is that while Tanguy or Matta's (a Chilean painter who had a huge influence in the New York of the 40s) biomorphic paintings still use an illusionistic landscape-like space as a background, Gorky's work is finely drawn with shapes that are surrounded by dense fields of brushwork. This combination of linear delicacy and implied violence in Gorky's paintings reveals a more personal and private world that is visible in the work of his predecessors.

Like Gorky, another artist who became a myth in the legend of the Abstract was Pollock. His roots were founded in the 'regionalist' school

Jackson Pollock. CONVERGENCE NC10. 1952

and later he spoke of his time with Thomas Hart Benton as "something against which to react very strongly".[1] Progressing on, he involved himself in a semi-abstract manner under the influence of Picasso and Miro, sometimes evoking fragments of the human figure. Of this period Pollocks paintings are ungainly and chaotic but there is a natural crudeness about them which was at the time foreign to modern European art except perhaps when one sees the crudeness of the Cobra artists in Belgium of 1952.

By 1947, Pollock had discarded the brush and the easel and was working on unstretched canvases tacked to the floor which brought him nearer and made him more a part of the painting. Claiming that the painting "had a life of its own",[2] he worked from all sides of the canvas. By doing this he could devote equal attention to each area of the canvas and create an 'all over' composition. The only subject matter in the final work are the actual splashes and moving lines which are dictated by the gestures and actions of the artist throwing the paint on the canvas. No other reference to anything exists other than the method of working.

This automatic way of working had its roots in Surrealism, because it was a surrealist tendancy to preserve the play element in art so that an exciting freshness would result. This method of working would produce accidents of all kinds, random and chance effects, were frequent. These effects were considered the means for achieving greater spontaneity, the splashes and drips of paint left by the brushwork would be cultivated. Never before in the history of art had there been a revolt against set principles and methods working to a point of extreme philisophy, the illumination of abstract consciousness. The neoplasticists had equated gesture with a lack of discipline, Kandinsky had feared that total abstraction might degenerate into pure decoration, and Picasso felt that he must

always leave 'a way in' to his painting. What Pollock achieved in his
work was the first action-painting-expressionistic-work of the abstract.
Pollock's work may have been rooted in the concept of the European surreal-
ists automation but his painting represents a break with one tradition and
the beginning of another. The effect of this re-evaluation in the plastic
arts would have rebounding effects all over America and Europe but no where
more so than in New York. The fundamental criticism of automatism is that
the unconscious cannot be directed, that it presents none of the possible
choices which, when taken constitute any expression's form. To give oneself
over completely to the unconscious was to become a slave. However it had
as a method very little to do with the unconscious and was more valued as
a plastic weapon with which to invent new forms.

The results meant that figurative work within the vanguard disappeared
along with anything termed representational to be replaced by the aesthetic.
It involved an unconditional pragmatic approach toward materials and tech-
niques which allowed greater freedom and more dramatic gestures. This in
turn led to the house painter's brushes and paints. The easel gave way
to the wall. Artists saw the possibility of mural scale art by virtue of
its sheer size, encompassing the spectator and becoming his total environment.
What characterised the work would be a high evaluation on content as a
consequence and a separation of the non-objective from the representational,
a conciliation of figuration yet at the same time challenging human and
natural themes. But perhaps more important to establish the painting as
object which was opposite to past history as a picture existing as a window
plane.

Of the major artists of his generation, de Kooning was the only one
to choose the human figure, first male then female, as his principle theme.
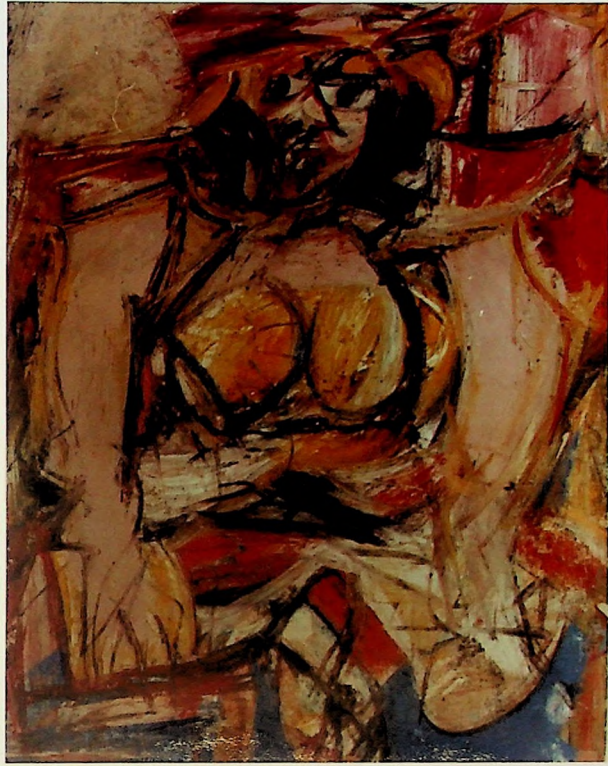
William De Kooning . Women IV . 1952-3

From the late thirties on into the 50s, he developed variations on the
'woman' that quickly came to be identified as his characteristic image.
From the more genteel and lyrical work of the early forties to the
fragmented and violated women of the early fifties a pictorial and
psychological development of theme exists.

In his work the pictorial dilemma is spatial. Contours are opened
to allow flesh and environment to flow into one another, anatomical forms
themselves have been fragmented; hence there is no clear statement as
where the figure is located in space, only a suggestion of fleshy body
parts creating 'a wall of living musculature'.3

In the milieu of Abstract Expressionism his work was attacked by
critics as being vulgar, perverse, infantile while the artists accused
him of taking a step backward forgetting he never rejected the figure in
the first place. To suggest the representational was definitely taboo.
But, for de Kooning, the women projected a summarisation of women painted
throughout history as idols. he approached from a point of concept as
woman represented as majestic cult image, about man's relation to her,
and about sex. Tobey   referred to using the figure and admitted

"We have tried to fit man into Abstraction but

he does not fit." 4

The women series of de Kooning only proves that this was a serious miscon-
ception.

His women series can be taken however as symptomatic of the crisis
facing figure painting, or more specifically the difficulty of representing
the figure without contour or modelling. The impossible transitions,
suggested by de Kooning's practice of ripping up drawings and sticking

Rothko. Untitled 1957
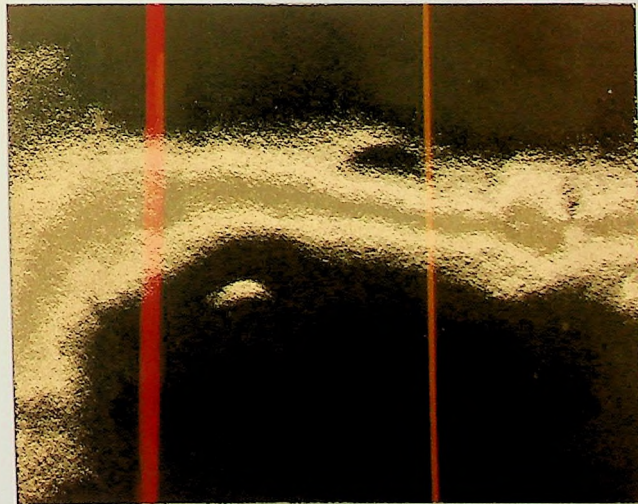
Barnet Newman. Dionysius 1949

them back together with the parts slightly askew, suggest jumps in space
that correspond to the manner in which forms dissolve, disappear and re-
appear in the paintings. Reminiscing of this period, de Kooning remarks
that;

> "Certain artists and critics attacked me for painting the
> women but I felt that this was their problem, not mine.
> I don't feel like a non-objective painter at all. Today
> some artists feel they have to go back to the figure and
> that word 'figure' becomes such a ridiculous omen." 5

This political notion of being either objective or non-objective,
representational or abstract, signaled the painterly ethos of the period
which produced the action paintings of Pollock, Kline, de Kooning and in
another camp, the 'Colour Field' artists, Newman, Rothko, Reinhardt
while Robert Motherwell existed somewhere between the two.

In the work of Newman, Rothko and Reinhardt can be found the first
examples of simplified abstraction, art without gesture based purely on
colour." Instead of using outlines, instead of making shapes or setting
off spaces, my drawings declare space." 6 However the real successful hero
of this group would be Rothko who sought after a spiritual content in his
work. As a result of the close-keyed harmonies and painterly edges Rothko's
images appear to float, rectangles hover buoyantly in the resonant space.
It is in the quality of light that radiates from some hidden central force
that distinguishes Rothko's colour from his contemporaries.

This period of Abstraction is one of the most heroic in painting,
producing some of the finest abstract forms yet only succeeding by maintain-
ing a strong sense of negation for representational values. Yet for how
long could one negate traditional values of representation? It seemed to
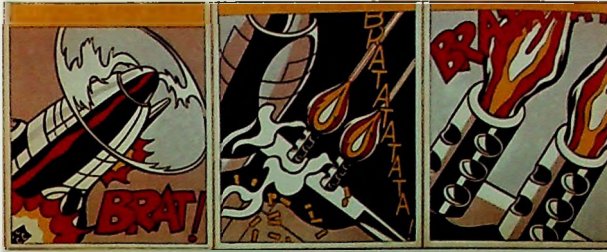
233 Roy Lichtenstein *As I Opened Fire* 1964
Magna on canvas 68 × 168¼ ins
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam © SPADEM

Roy Lichtenstein. As I opened fire 1964
DROWNING girl 1963
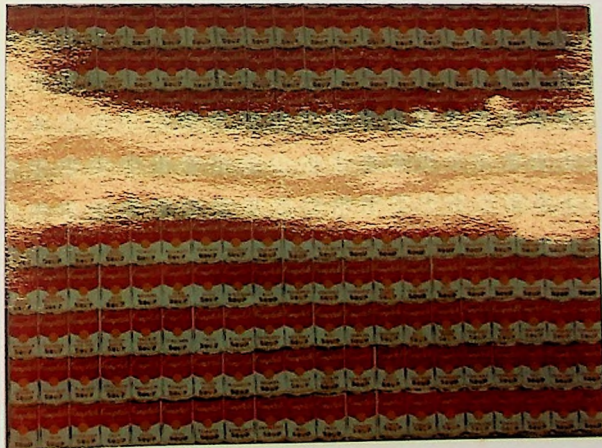
Andy Warhol. cans 1962

be answered in a 'never again' voice. With the increase in technological
means and mass communication, the camera and film industry have taken over
the responsibility of representing the relationship of man and his environ-
ment. To deny that any representational art was being done at all it to
falsify the issue. Some like Larry Rivers and the early work of Richard
Dietenkorn used figurative themes of representation with abstract express-
ionistic qualities but they would be individuals working on the fringes of
the vanguard. In 1946, Newman had stated that "the artist in America does
not have objects" but by the late fifties and early sixties this would prove
to be untrue. 7

By the time the sixties arrived, young painters began challenging the
reputable figures of Abstract Expressionism. The two distinct reactions
to Abstract Expressionism have been labeled 'Pop Art', which represented
a return to figuration and post-painterly Abstraction which was a general
move on the part of America's younger abstract painters toward a clearer
definition of structure and colour. Pop art, like Dada, was a form of anti-
Art and its aim was to shock. Roy Lichenstein's work admits where he chose
his subject matter (the comic strip) for no other reason than that. Yet
as a political voice, this comic strip painting shows scenes of romance and
violence which indicate what a debased use of mass communications the comic
strip is. However his use of imitating the work of Pollock and Kline in the
method of comic strip style is an indication of his true satirical nature.
Other artists who emerged on the Pop scene and have now reputable names are
Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella.

The pop artists by insisting that their works were Art, gradually
became vital members of the cultural elite. Warhol's photo-montage prints
in repetitive form, of such things like Campbell's soup cans or 'car crash'

Jaspar Johns. Flag 1955

emphasised his cynical attitude to art values while Jaspar Johns painted
paintings of the American flag and of numbers , stressed his valuation on
the power of symbols. The art being produced became increasingly difficult
to define particularily when the important issues would concern such things
as 'process and concept'. By 1969, Sol Le witt was exhibiting in gallery
spaces the written word. These pieces of work usually stemmed from ideas
about art - "if words are used and they proceed from ideas about art, they
are   art   and not literature".8 This idea of concept in art would
introduce a process never before imagined, to reduce art activity to mere
basic words or sometimes to bring environmental qualities of the landscape
into the gallery, such as rocks arranged by the artist within a space in
the gallery. In the words of Andy Warhol which summed up the spirit of
the time - "To be famous for five minutes" - surely must indicate the
lack of real artistic sincerity within the arts. 9 America had become a world
market in the sixties selling pop and minimal art to everyone. The process
and conceptual artists deliberately rejected the commercial aspect,meaning
to restore to the artist the position of shaman and mystery-maker in the cult-
ure. Rubber, oil, wood, non-pretty, unfinished, unglazed materials that
made up the real structure around the artist became important. It was in
the action, the making of the work which was to reveal life's mystery to the
artist and the viewer; in the making of a work lay the finding of its
meaning.

By the beginning of the seventies, artists had begun extending their
ideas into the landscape. They became 'earth artists', wanting to make
contact with time, to reintroduce space/time co-ordinates into art.
If it was said of them that they were echoing the national preoccupation
of returning to the land, it was only in terms of a search for new space,
rather than a gesture toward Conservation or a re-awakened interest in

Robert smithson. spiral jetty 1970

christo. valley curtain 1970-72.
Wrapped Coast, Australia 1969

primitivism. The artist Robert Smithson described his visual impetus as
"looking for a denaturalization rather than built up scenic beauty." 10
For his infamous earth work called 'Spiral Jetty', he would shift 6,650 tons
of earth and construct a huge spiral jetty from the land into the salt
lakes of Utah.

Another artist involved in earth work would be Christo. His now famous
method of working would involve wrapping up buildings and coastlines in
sheets of tarpaulin. This was intended to emphasise the structure and
nature of the particular piece wrapped up, of marking a transition and of
instituting a barrier in order to reform and restate a vision.

Of course this concept of working would have an effect within the
interiors of art-world spaces, like galleries, in the method of installations
performance art and video work. Literally hundreds of artists were making
room installations during the seventies. The only uniting factor between
them being the challenge of changing the viewers perceptions about what
space is. This installation process would continue throughout the seventies
finding itself manipulated in various forms of wood or steel, twine, rocks or
whatever the artist could use to 'reshape' the spatial qualities of a gallery.

The real dominant spirit at this point in time was a sense of question-
ing values, of perception and investigation into what one could determine
the requirements of the art object as art. It was a time when artists stopped
painting and started probing philosophical questions about art, and when they
produced an art piece it was usually in context of representing that quest-
ioning element. For example the painter Sam Gilliam was involved in three-
dimensional structure painting during the early 70s. His work took the format
of suspending large painted canvas sheets from the wall on to the floor,
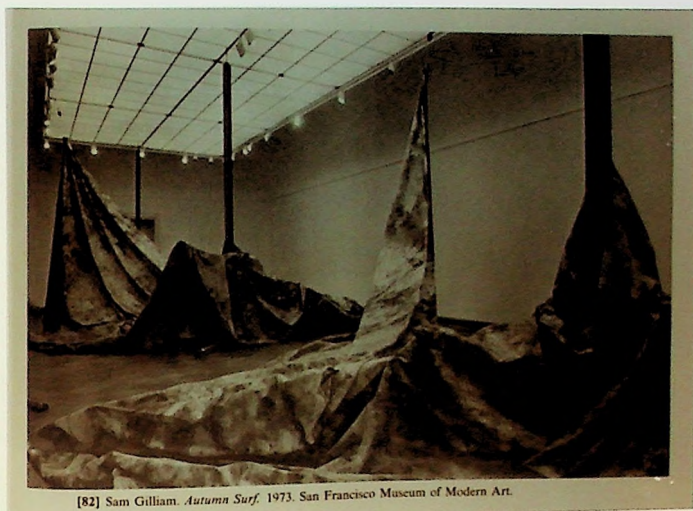
[82] Sam Gilliam. *Autumn Surf.* 1973. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

sometimes tied to a rock or piece of bark. The idea of getting away from
the conventional use of rectangle as a support structure for a painting.
He refers to his conceptual approach as having an affinity with the work of
Pollock- "There is an attempt in my own work of continuing the dialogue
with what was happening with Pollock working on the floor but I am taking
that dialogue to the wall."[11] What must be understood is that in this
context of conceptualised ideas, art cannot be approached with the same
expectations as the early modern movements of the century, or even the last
great plague of Abstract Expressionism of the 40s and 50s. This abandoning of
traditional values is not something which to regret or deplore. The vitality
of art lies in its creative response to the circumstances from which it
arises. It therefore becomes an important step to considering the reasons
why this rejection of every facet of what 'art' traditionally meant,
reasons which must be sought in every society.

Within this century, there has been a great experience of horrors
on an unprecedented scale, which have been brought vividly into homes and
minds by mass communications. The result is that human insecurity and moral
doubt exist on a scale never before imagined. The consequence of this has
been to produce creative people in society to sense unconsciously or reflect
consciously, and to seek a means of expressing their understanding in ways
that are entirely new.

Footnotes.

1
    Abstract Expressionism in America. Seitz.

2
    Ibid.

3
    Abstract Expressionism, The Triumph of American Painting. Sandler, 1977.

4
    Abstract Expressionism in America. Seitz.

5
    Willem De Kooning. Pittsburgh International Series.

6
    Abstract Expressionism, The Triumph of American Painting, Sandler, 1977.

7
    Ibid.

8
    The Pluralist Era, American Art 1968-81. Corinne Robins, 1984.

9
    Ibid.

10
    Ibid.

11
    Ibid.

"The human condition hangs in

the balance at the present time.

Anthropologically, everything is

open. We are searching ... " [1]

Since 1980, a great flood of painting has swamped the international

art world. The painter is back in business with his brush and paints,

after a decade of being made redundant by the minimal and conceptual spirit.

The terminology now being used is bad painting, savage painting, neo-express-

ionism and anything that might sum up this rejuvenation of the figure with

the canvas, or more to the point, the critical debate. Figuration never

really disappeared despite the discourse of the 60s and 70s since it is

those artists who are enjoying today's spotlight, who continued with this

pursuit for over twenty years.

It is this personal insistence on the part of some individualists

to pursue figuration and perhaps a sense of urgency for the re-employment

of painting into the market that has given us this great pool of painters

today. Of the many questions now being asked of this new surge, can the

complex past be further transformed and given new lease of life?

Must it really be blotted out from individual memory? These are the questions

that artists have to face and answer. Society can only receive the goods

without dictating.

The first thing that can be recognised is that methodology has changed.

The handling of paint is reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism, very big

and gestural. Individually, the German, British, Italians and Americans

treat their respective contents and styles very differently. However

the impetus is evidently more European than American. It is the Germans

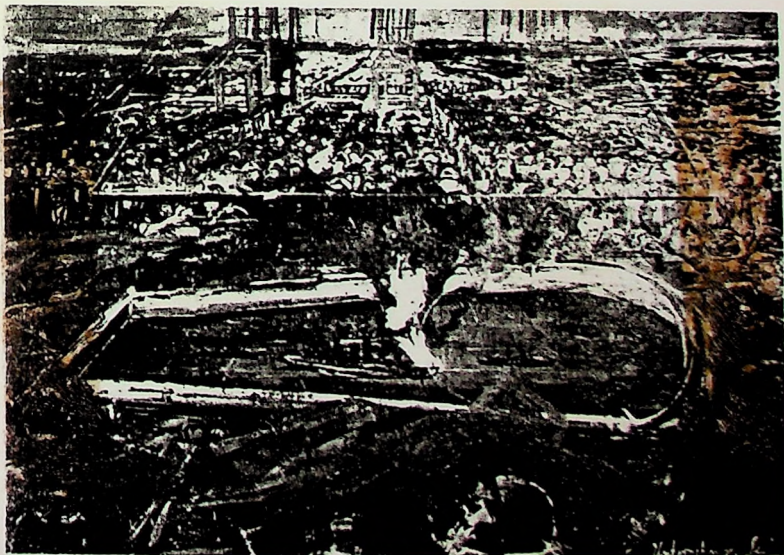who appear to have the strongest voice in painting, perhaps because of

Immerdorf. Café Rehersal 1980

Penck. Metaphysical passage
   through a zebra. 1975

Anselm Kiefer. Nero Painting 1974

Anselm Kiefer. Operation sea-lion 1975

the dark mood in their work evocative of the northern tradition mixed
with the historical context of their past and present politics.

The Germans who fall into this category are Baselitz, Kiefer, Lupertz,
Koberling, Hodicke, Immendorf and Penck. If German painters need stimul-
ation from a particular city, country or philosophy, surely it must be the
severed city of Berlin which could provide that moral courage. For Baselitz
and Kiefer and Koberling, the answer to abstraction took place in Berlin,
a much more rigorous and radical place than anywhere else in the Federal
Republic.

Of all the contemporary painters, Kiefer is regarded as the most
'German'. And in fact, he is more than any other painter, a painter of
German Themes. This sometimes has been misconstrued as being a symptom
of nationalist re-awakening. What Kiefer is trying to achieve or put
forward in fact is a work of mourning. The experience of suffering mani-
fested in his pictures is matched by the materials he uses. His empty
interiors and landscape panoramas with straw, sand and ashes, give us a
view of Germany as a poor, wretched country. There are many layers of
interpretations of his work which make it difficult to read into. For
instance, his Hero Painting allows us to identify the picture as a vis-
ion of the act of painting, as an artistic game or as a catastrophe staged
by its creator, by his use of super-imposing a large pallete across the
canvas. The same effect is produced in Operation Sea-Lion. By a confusion of
dimensions, the sea battle is staged in an enormous bath-tub embedded in
the landscape. The ships are only toys but the effect is very real.
Kiefer's work always presents a motif without presenting the figure yet
it is that landscape or interior which belongs to the people, we respond
to most.

George Baselitz.
M.M.M in G. and A 1961-66

George Baselitz
Portrait of Elke. 1974

Markus Lupertz.
Black Red Gold Dithyrambic 1974

Much has been written about the puzzling fact that since 1969, Baselitz
has painted his motifs upside down. By doing this it seems that he is
able to keep his subject at arm's length and concentrate on its pictorial
realisation, its abstract qualities. It also gives a certain ambivalence
to the work. Sometimes the motif confronts us and at the same time eludes.
This method of rearranging the perceptive view of his subjects has its
roots in earlier works. During the 80s, his figures are divided up or
cut up into strips which don't fit together (recalling the way Surrealists
played with pieces of paper). This makes reality seem fragmented. It is
through the use of these methods that Baselitz presents reality as quest-
ionable and fragile.

From 1969 to 1975, Lupertz developed a phase of painting motifs.
They were steel helmets, anti-tank guns, officer caps and army equipment
lying resting, rusting in the landscape. These are very German motifs
which reflect Germany's past and are still to some extent taboo. What
they do is provoke by intention and maintain an element of risk by being
incomprehensible, sometimes finding condemnation. The mistake often
incurred is that he seeks to glorify past Nazism but one only has to
look at the context in which they appear. They are junk, rubbish left
to decay.

Getting to grips with a motif in this way, with the series
Black, Red, Gold - Dithyrambic, he was involved not only with formal
problems but the intellectual effort as well. Brave too when we
consider that he faces up to a question which so many Germans are all too
eager to supress - that of coming to terms with their recent past.

All these painters would have been very conscious of the modernist

developments around them during the 60s and 70s, registering Dada and
Cobra, with coming to grips with abstraction and the conceptual era.
What matters is what they have done with these 'isms'. They have in effect
pooled many of modernism's characteristics together to bring a very
Germanic phenomena into painting.

However, Thomas Lawson states that -

"These young painters ingratiate themselves by pretend-
ing to be in awe of history. Their enterprise is disting-
uished by a homage to the past and in particular by a
nostalgia for the early days of modernism ... what they
give us is a pastiche of the historical consciousness,
an exercise in bad faith." 2

This very personal critical attack is of course Lawson's legit-
imate right to voice but in truth cannot be proved. The sole arbitrator
can only rest with posterity. When Picasso exhibited his Demoiselles
D'Avignon in 1907, he also received loud condemnation both from critics
and painters alike. What must be recognised is not a question of whether
this type of painting is good or bad, but that for the first time in
post-war years is that painting has been recognised as offering the
opportunity of formulating and revealing the specific experiences of
suffering within contemporary life. Painters are now employed and
conceptualism is old hat. Is it still possible for art to grow out of
a particular culture or landscape with a specific character?
Cezanne and Munch themselves didn't exist as being anonymous 'world art'
but were rooted in the origins of Provence or Kristiana and found univer-
sal recognition by virtue of artistic power. It seems we must always

continue to openly assess again and again, if we are to get a positive
view of today's painting.

     "If one plumbs the depths of painting, the images
     are revealed."[3]

Seemingly it is often forgotten by those who find preference in
viewing the history of art as a strict linear passage of progression
and this categorises German painting now as post-conceptual or post-
modern, that the fathers of this movement are well into their forties
and have been painting for something like 20 years as in the case of
Baselitz, Penck and Lupertz. In fact, anyone who does not make this a
central consideration is limiting their response to the artists' work.

Alongside the response given to Germans came an equal response to
the young Italians who have been labelled 'metaphysical'. Their language
no longer follows the logic or the mainstream of recent post-modernism,
characterised by rectilinear and consistent development. Their new
expressiveness, instead sinks its roots into an open and drifting nomad-
ism, without the trappings of geometrics . The idea propelling this
work is drifting; it is a movement with no pre-conceived directions,
no departures or arrivals only the desire to find an anchorage in the
sensibilities movements. In their works, the young Italians transmit
a subjectivity which is not private or auto-biographical but more made
of the structural elements which define subjectivity; changeability,
contradiction, love of detail. An active and not aggressive sensibility
permeates with a belief in pleasure in these works. Those who have
attained the spotlight of the international scene are Cucchi, Chia,
Clemente and Paladino.

Sandro chia . successo al café 1982

"What is most interesting in painting is the chasm
which divides paintings from other things." 4

Chia draws on diverse sources - cultural, historical and art historical -
and assimilates them within the context of his personal experience to
create an art of originality and freshness. He states;

"What I'm trying to put into my work is what I am.
Culturally, anthropologically ... This tradition is
something I ate with my food as a child, because I
was born in a certain place." 5

Chia in fact acknowledges his nationalist identity and its vast cultural
heritage. Though conceptualism and minimalism expanded his perception,
he felt constrained by their limitations in terms of solving painterly
problems. Gradually he moved towards an art based on intuitions and
synthesis, a more open painting that celebrates the physical properties
of the medium with an explosive exhuberance of colour and brushwork.
The surface quality is enhanced by highly personal imagery, rich in
metaphor, fantasy, allegory, emotion and nostalgia. At times the work
is extremely extroverted by his illustrations of sex and excretion, functions
which serve as vehicles for purging emotions, such as fear and pity. In
his work, the buffoonish gestures indicate a twentieth-century notion;
self mockery as a means for the relaxation of anxiety.

An understanding of the metaphysical painter's identification with
Italian history and their love of commonplace objects is fundamental in
understanding Chia's work. De Chirico wrote about the importance of the
commonplace in art in 1919-

"It's the ordinary things that reveal the simplicity which
points to a higher and more hidden state of being and which
is the very splendor of art." 6

Chia especially admires de Chirico and is inspired by the aura
of mystery in his work, noting that there is mystery in a still life,
in simple things. In Chia's work, there is no ambiguity which invites
us to search for solutions, but rather a deliberate ambiguity elevated
to the level of metaphor.

The ethereal nature of his floating figures creates a metaphysical
energy which Chia thinks should be at the heart of painting.

> "A painting is not just an object. It has an aura
> about it .... it's the same feeling I think that
> Renaissance people got from painting..... Painting
> is made heavy with dirty things. But then become
> light." 7

This involvement with objects, things, people and landscape is
also reflected in the work of Cucchi.

> "A painter goes on being a painter for the idea of
> things, of mountains, of women. Men are painters,
> cyclists, sailors, warriors." 8

As Cucchi sees himself as part of his surroundings, so he depicts man
and his environment as inextricably entwined. His narrative theme speaks
of man's destiny and the difficulty of survival in a violent world. His
landscapes are inhibited by strange primordial figures, shown nude, app-
earing to play the roles of victor or victim, hunter or hunted. Of course
the dramas are unclear, the iconography is impenetrable and open to many
interpretations.

This deliberate ambiguity of meaning is in contrast to the simplicity
and force of the formal vehicles used to convey the meaning, scale, colour
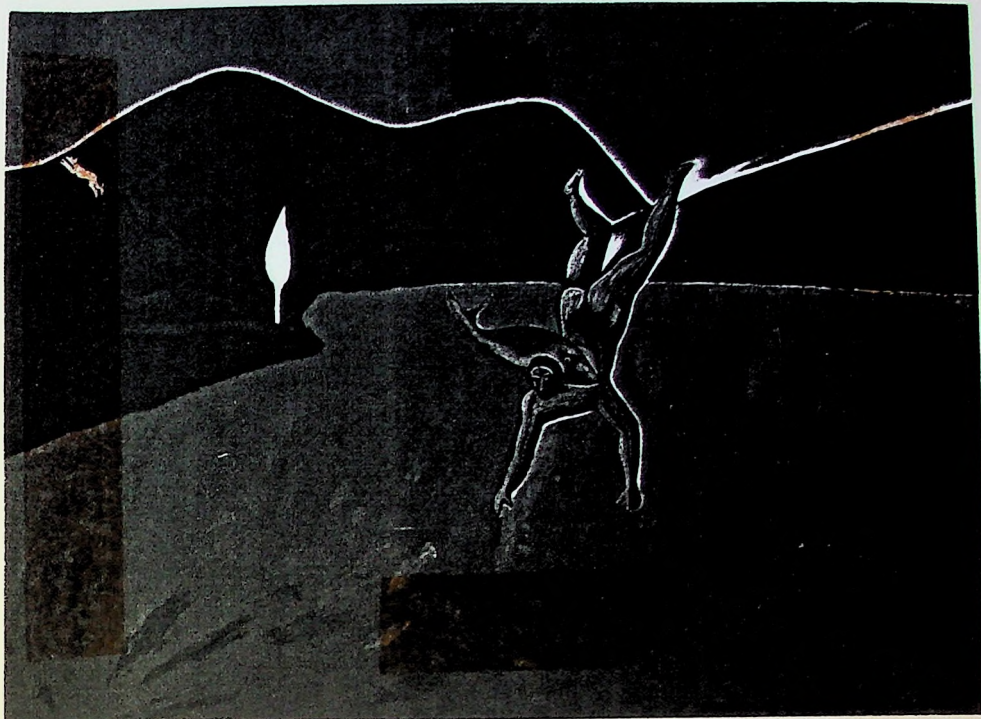
Cucchi. A fish on the back of the Adriatic sea
1980

Cucchi. Battle of the regions 1981

and paint surface are exploited to their fullest potential to heighten the
urgency and impact of expression in these canvases.

Cucchi renders figures simply and economically with bold, summarizing
contour lines. Dense colour and heavy impasto give these figures their
corporate reality. This weight Cucchi underscores by conveying a sense of
the ever-present and powerful pull of gravity- figures plunge to the earth
from the sky or menacingly stomp the earth with their feet as in
A fish on the back of the Adriatic Sea or Battle of the Regions . Dramatic
foreshortening pulls the viewer into the space of the compositions. Shifts
of scale are abrupt, arbitrary and create an environment that corresponds
to the artist's imagination, not the real world.

It seems as if the mysterious imagery and brutal forms, the bold
colour sense feed his paintings with primeval sources of inspiration to
constitute an art of harsh and primitive power, yet all the time a subtle
sense of poetry pervades throughout.

This method of working would be very different to the work of Clemente.
Clemente sees the mixing of intellect with the perception of the eyes as be-
ing an integral part of the structure of the human act of seeing. For seeing
also becomes the source of power by which the imagination can build forms
and figures which he continually changes and corrupts.

Clemente's work is violently primordial with a strong gestural
use of impasto, colour is garish and fluourescent at times. Again the
figures exist in an arbitrary space involved in mysterious activity. In
his two paintings Fortune and Perseverance he touches upon a nerve that
could induce terror or disgust into how we perceive his work. Fortune

Francesco Clemente. Fortune 1982

Francesco Clemente. Perservence 1982

shows the devil Lucifer, bringer of light, digging a mound that reflects
another mound while some incomprehensible figure floats in rather gesticulat-
ing manner in the centre. Perseverance depicts a female figure holding a
classical example of history's architecture. However it is precisely the
terror of night, or the nightmare of the past in which Clemente finds fuel
for his work.

The art of the last years has done away with the emotional moralistic
rigidity of the previous era. It has brought back into the mobile territory
of an experience which is no longer rhetorical but fragmentary and meta-
physical. It has dared to express attitudes not only about materials or
form, but the human issues of power, morality, sexuality and other matters
which have been delegated to the worlds of film. But one thing is at least
clear from the work of the Italians and Germans is that their art no longer
depends on what the artist intended. This poses a problem of whether they
are capable of sincerity and more important, questions our very own evaluative
criteria.

In a historical context, it will be posterity who ultimately decides the
true value of work executed down the long passage of time . It will note
too, that in the 80s, the painters of Europe were back in business after a
long spell of being in a state of inertia. There are many debates about
this present painting, but it cannot be denied that the search for something
else exists in everyone.

> "We all want to see something new, but it is by no means
> clear that what we have been getting so far has any merit
> beyond a certain novelty." 9

Lawson is very correct when he proposes that there is nothing 'clear'
about the painting being done at the moment, but then when was it ever clear

in the context of history, that what existed was not just mere novelty at the time of execution. Aesthetic quality is not some figment constructed outside the work through discourse, ideology, interest or promotional opportunism. It is realised, or not, through material transformations of paint, canvas and pictorial conventions. The capacity to recognise it, appears to be rooted in a genetically variable ability for intuitive judgement and the cultivation of informed taste.

The interesting questions which come to the surface now are why if two methods of investigation, that of post-modernism and expressionism, existing side by side in the 60s and 70s cannot continue to exist together or why each must have their separate spotlight? Perhaps it's a matter of fashionable taste fuelled by entrepreneurs and critics.

Throughout that long passage of time, the figure has always been a part of our art heritage, being manipulated in many ways, only now in the 80s, it is in itself a source of critical debate. Many artists are sticking the figure into painting and perhaps with disastrous effects, but none the less, it paves the way for a return to using painterly skills. As Kitaj remarked in an interview:

> "God knows there's plenty of depictive art around now
> but as to reform, I think that a whole generation or
> two will have to learn how to draw very well before
> you will get the type of Ingres or Delacroix, Degas
> or Picasso, who will arise out of a high training -
> great inventing synthesizers combining the saving grace
> of heresy with pearldiving into the traditional
> deep." 10

Footnotes

1
   Thomas Wachweger. Artscribe International No. 57, April/May 1986.

2
   Thomas Lawson, Contemporary Art.

3
   Hodicke, German Art in the 20th Century.

4
   Sandro Chia, Italian Art Now.

5
   Ibid.

6
   De Chirico, Italian Art Now.

7
   Sandro Chia, Italian Art Now.

8
   Cucchi, Italian Art Now.

9
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10
   Kitaj talking to Frederick Tuten, Art Forum, Jan. 1982.

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