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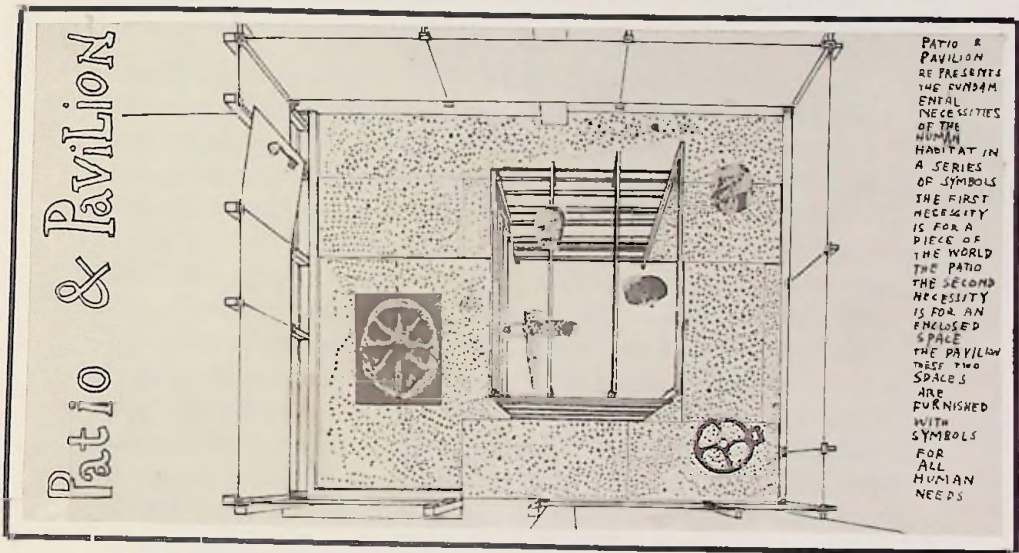
THESIS SUBJECT: POP ART IN ENGLAND 1954 - 1964
DEALING WITH INFLUENCES GOVERNING
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS ERA IN ART
HISTORY

DATE: MARCH 1978

INTRODUCTION

My reason for choosing Pop Art as a subject for my thesis is quite simple - I was born at the same time as Pop Art and I feel that one should have an interest in, and a knowledge of, contemporary happenings. Having lived all my life in the midst of pop culture I feel more capable of understanding the ideas behind it and the factors influencing it, and so therefore better able to discuss it. The ideas behind the movement are not hard to understand - I have heard of the 'Unhappy Cleavage' between 'applied' art or commercial art which surrounds us in our daily life and the 'pure' art of exhibitions and galleries which many of us find so hard to understand. It is natural that this cleavage presented a challenge to the art students for whom it had become a matter of course that one must always side with whatever is despised by people of 'taste'. All other forms of anti-art had by the 1950s become a matter for the high-brows, they shared with the hatred ideas of art, its exclusiveness and its mystical pretensions. Why was it not so in music? There was a new kind of music that had conquered the masses and engaged their interest to the extent of hysterical devotion. This was pop music. Could we not have pop art as well? And could it not be achieved by simply using the images familiar to everyone?

It is the job of an historian to make intelligible what has actually happened. Not being an historian I feel it is my job to write and discuss my appreciation and criticism of Pop Art as I know it.



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FIG 1

Pop Art in England, with which I am dealing, came in three phases. Its originators were, Paolozzi and Hamilton, and its main figures R Smith and Blake in the second phase, with Hackney, Kitaj and Phillipa in the third phase.

The term 'Pop Culture' acquired currency in conversation between the winter of 1954-55 in connection with the shared work and discussion among members of the Independent Group, a small informal organisation which was set up for the purpose of holding exploratory meetings to find new ideas. They discovered that they had in common a culture that persisted beyond any special interest or skills in art, architecture, design, or art criticism that any of them might possess. One result of the discussions was to take pop culture out of the realm of 'escapism', 'sheer entertainment', and 'relaxation', and to treat it with the seriousness of art.

THE FIRST PHASE OF ENGLISH POP ART (1953-58) was strongly linked with themes of technology. The exhibition 'This is Tomorrow' became a celebrated incident in English art, and some say it can be related to the development of the first phase of pop.

FIG I PAGE FROM THE CATALOGUE "THIS IS TOMORROW"

The exhibition, in Whitechapel Art Gallery 1956, was an anthology of twelve separate displays. It began as a proposal from the French Groupe Espace, to arrange an English exhibition, to demonstrate the combination of art and

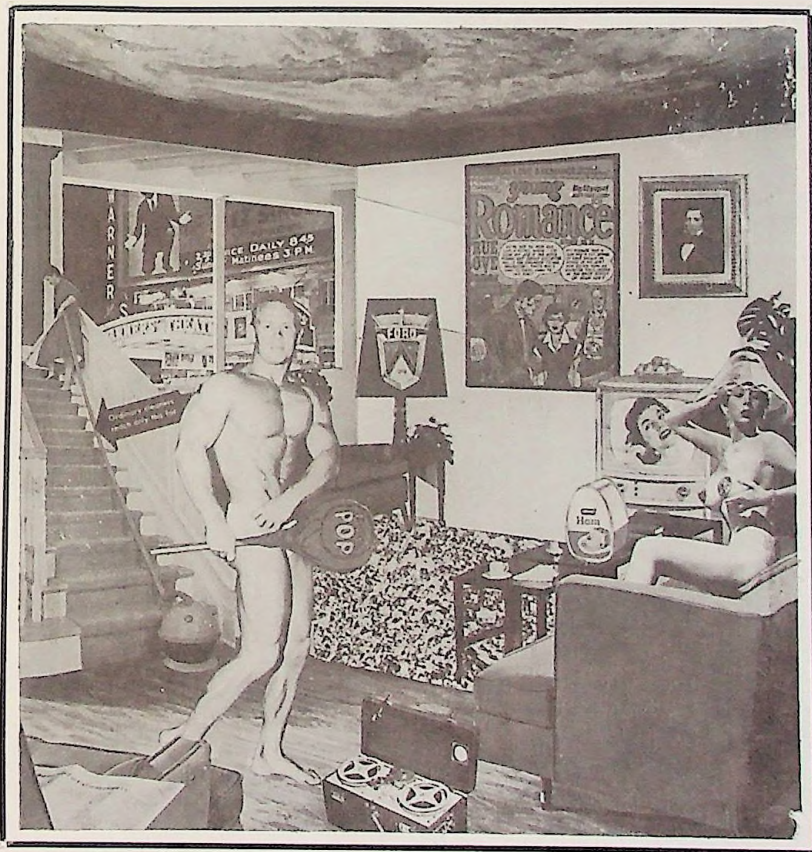


FIG 2

architecture. The exhibition was totally fresh. Areas of the gallery space, were allocated to various groups, which then worked on their own. The results ran from pure architectural pavilions to one exuberent carnival piece. I believe by this exhibition that the hidden environmental interests were brought out into the open. For instance in 1953 both the preliminary national and the international finals of the 'Unknown Political Prisoner's' sculpture competition were held in London. Most people, it seems were in total agreement that the best works were not the sculpturesque ones, but the environmental ones. The winner was Reg Butler, whose piece was of the environmental type, physically open to the spectator. The total effect of the Gallery, made even the most uncommunicative participate in the drama of the competing elements, parallel to the street outside.

Richard Hamilton Mac Hale and John Voelcker had a piece of fun-fair architecture: false perspective, soft floor and black light within, an exterior covered with quotations from pop culture, including Marilyn Monroe, a giant beer bottle and a seventeen-foot-high cut-out robot with a girl from a movie marquee advertising forbidden planet.

The catalogue included a collage by Hamilton called - "Just What is it Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing?"

SEE FIG 2

To me this collage, spells out the idea of the first phase of pop culture - moon ceiling, muscle-man, nude girl, etc.

For me the items in the collage are represented as an environment, a room space. Space seems to have been a preoccupation of the various artists of this era, artists were revealing a sense of the city - not as a means to reform society, but as a symbol - thick scenes crisscrossed with the tracks of human activity. I suppose the truth of it is that the artists accepted the industrial culture and assimilated aspects of it into their art. Take for instance Hamilton's "She" where he substitutes domestic technology for automotive, his position being one of the knowing consumer. This awareness of being, in fact, a consumer is a drastic departure from the bohemien ideals of other modern artists with their distrust of possessions.

THE SECOND PHASE OF POP ART (1957-61) on the other hand was abstract. Richard Smith, who was central to this development, is on record as saying that he considers himself "second generation independent". I take that to mean that the second phase was born from the first - but as an era of art itself it can be said to be independent. The Royal College of Art, where both Paolozzi and Hamilton were teaching, was the chief source of the second phase of Pop Art. The Royal College of Art was the breeding place for the second phase of Pop Art as a result of spontaneous activity among the students, caused partly by staff influence. Richard Smith and William Green were there, also Robyn Denny and Peter Blake, inseparable from Smith and Coleman.

The switch from the figurative to the abstract basis characterised the second phase of pop.

The influence of abstract art came from America, and in 1957 at the 'young contemporaries', an annual exhibition of art students' work Smith exhibited a painting influenced, some say, by both Sam Francis and American Pop Culture. It was called 'Blue Yonder'. A phase which turned the soft, liquid paint

marks of a tall abstract painting into an image of the sky. There seems to have been no question of abandoning the 'humble sources' only of introducing them in another way. Existing memories and past affiliations were to be aroused by apparently non-figurative paintings. For instance most of the artists who contributed to the second phase of pop art were fairly regular movie goers. Thus the idea of involvement and spectator participation appears in the art of this time. Also the bombardment of the signs, colours and lights of the mass media on the scenes had an effect too. The artists of this phase painted topical paintings by means of imagery. The best illustration of this is Smith's painting in 1961 of Marilyn Monroe, called MM. Panels at the top of the page, a sensual blur of flesh, and a curve that does not abandon her smile make the connection. This transformation of imagery into painting does not depart from the original ideas of the Independent Group. During this phase illusion was important but also there was an emphasis on the environment, that is to say, the environment, conceived as our world, depended on an acceptance of the Large Scale of American Abstract Art, and of American pop culture at the time. The relation between American Abstract Art and American pop culture was pursued constantly by various artists but especially by Smith, sometimes painting an abstract painting and indicating the pop element by its title. But on the other hand, the pop art aspect could also overwhelm every other element, as in the case of William Green, who became celebrated in 1957 for his large paintings made of riding a bicycle over them when wet and by burning them. The first works done this way had crazy titles like 'Napoleon's Chest at Moscow 1957'. In 1959 Green held a show called 'Errol Flynn' in which the paintings had absolutely nothing to do with Errol Flynn. In fact, the works which were exhibited were not even the ones prepared for the show, which had suffered from "technical production problems". He once said 'any meaning is possible' and he prearranged the title of the exhibition. Green was the hero of the mass media (TV,

newspapers, etc were full of him) but he did not survive the media's switch to other heroes.

The most important environmental show was 'Place' 1959 in which Denny, Ralph Rummey and Smith collaborated to make a unified space of paintings in two sizes, standing like screens on the floor. It was a maze of man-size paintings with the three artists' work arranged systematically. In the catalogue Coleman remarked "Important is the idea of participation in this environment. For example, the movies, cinemascope and cinerama. The identification with the environment of the mass media is a significant decision for these painters". Rummey's works were hard and two-tone in colour but forming silhouettes of heads elongated like the cinemascope screen or rounded at the edges like TV.

In 1960 Pop Art appeared unexpectedly from Cambridge University. The New Vision Gallery raised a group of four artists - George Carrol, James Mellor, Tim Wallis and Ray Wilson. The Gallery, accepting the fact that abstract art was a container for pop art, showed not only their work but also a collection of pin-up material. So even though the Cambridge Group did not get pop references into their art, but put it into a setting of throwaway and technical material the result was a development of Green's "Errol Flynn" show and of a new power given to expandable material.

THE THIRD PHASE OF POP ART which emerged decisively at the 'Young Contemporaries' exhibition of 1961, consisted mainly of a new group of artists from the Royal College of Art. A note from the catalogue says 'A group, seen here for the first time, is of artists who connect their art with the city. They do so not by painting a factory chimney or a queue, but by using typical products and objects, including the techniques of Graffiti and the imagery of mass communications. For these artists the creative act is nourished on the urban environment they have always lived in.'

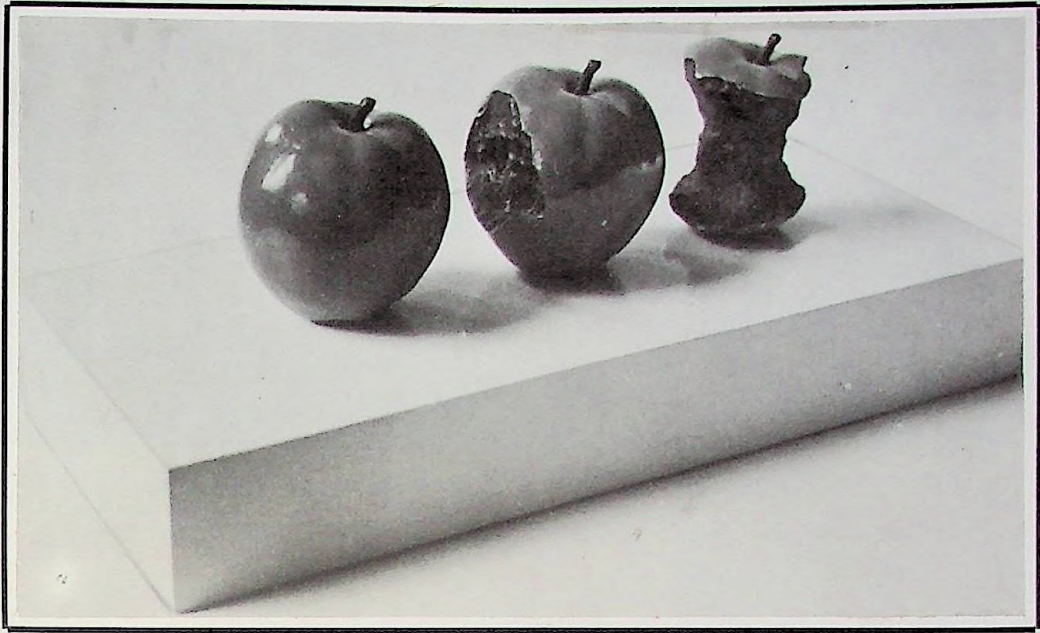


FIG 3

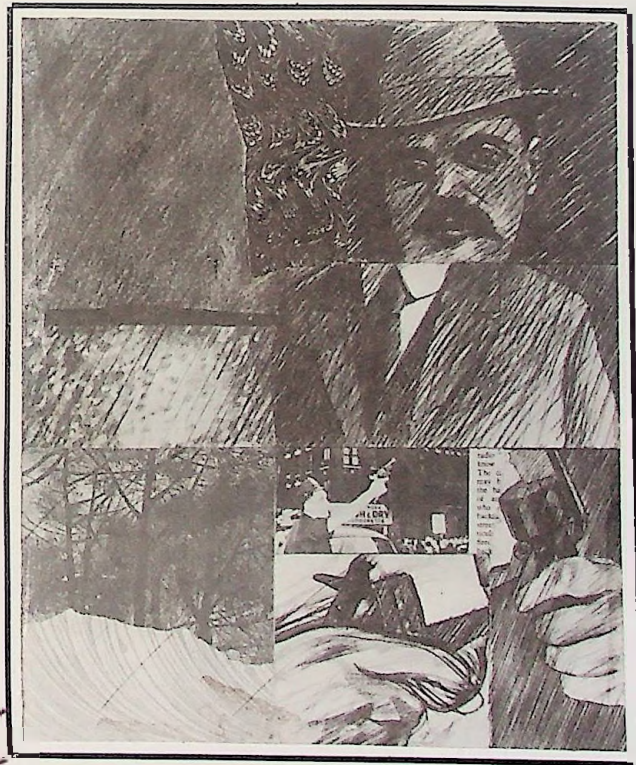


FIG 4

The artists were Billy Apple, who changed his name from Barrie Bates, due to his obsession with Apples. In the illustration below, entitled 2 minutes, 3.3 seconds painted in 1962, you can see his 'Apple-obsession' of the time! (though I'm told he has since changed to neon-rainbows!)

FIG 3 Billy Apple "2 minutes 3.3 seconds" 1962. Painted BRONZE

Derek Boshier, Patrick Caulfield, David Hockney, Allen Jones, R B Kitaj, Peter Phillips and Norman Toynton.

R B Kitaj was a major influence on the other artists. Allen Jones says "I learned more, I think, about an attitude to painting merely from watching him. His influence wasn't one of imagery but of a dedicated professionalism and real toughness about painting." Apart from his presence in college Kitaj exerted a strong influence through his painting - although he says himself that it is only since 1962 that he has produced paintings that satisfy him.

FIG 4 R.B.Kitaj Untitled 1963 Pencil and collage

His preference as a painter is for art that is not bound

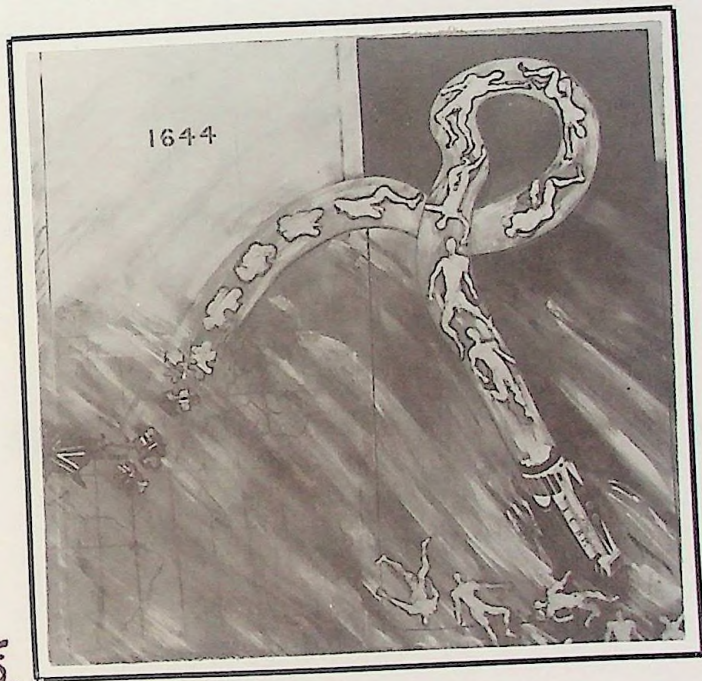


FIG 5

completely to the marks on the canvas - the world outside the canvas seems to be his preoccupation. Iconography and the changes that occur in the transmission of the images give him as much content in his painting as does the manipulation of colour. His paintings include references to ancient ikons, American Indian drawings, Canova, etc. Kitaj seems to me to have had a deep sense of the endless permutations of the word and image, of source and modification - he says "some books have pictures and some pictures have books".

The third phase of pop art could really be described as the second wave of figurative art and so the new artists revelled in a post-Kitaj medley of techniques. Phillips used symbols of the pinball machine and the leather jacket set. Derek Boshier mingled images of cereal packets, weather maps and transfers to make flighty images of the space race.

FIG 5 DEREK BOSHIER "Re-Think, Re-Entry" 1962 Oil on CANVAS

David Hockney overlaid children's art, primitive paintings and graffiti.



FIG 2



FIG 3

FIG 6 DAVID HOCKNEY "AIKA-SELTZER" (THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BOY IN THE WORLD)

A problem arose at the start of the third phase because of the unifying different kinds of signs drawn from the varied sources. The art of Hockney and Boshier was more graphic than painterly. In graphic art one can use a loose series of imagery - the standard of the painting is judged by its vividness and charm.

FIG 7 ANTHONY DONALDSON "IT WON'T BE LONG" 1964 OIL ON CANVAS

The pressure of organisation in painting is higher and English artists do not have a firm tradition by which to measure their performance. In the United States, on the other hand, the formal level of abstract art often persists into pop art. There are continuities between abstract arts formality and image-bearing pop-art.

In 1963 Boshier adopted a more rigorous kind of painting, but Hockney, on the other hand, still held to the elements of the romantic and the graphic. 'I paint what I like, when I like and where I like'. Living by such a statement a rambling and discursive kind of art was sure to follow and it did. Boshier, in turn, said 'All the images in this new work are very much to do with the image of projection - rather like the phrase "20th Century Fox Presents" in the movies'. His work showed this change by losing the figurative elements and maintaining a contact with the mass-produced environment.

CONCLUSION

It can be said that pop art in England developed as an aesthetic proposal made in opposition to established opinion. As the idea spread, however, its absorption by various painters led to a series of adaptations. It was qualified by its use in relation to painterly abstract art. It has been treated as a renewal of figurative art, trendy as in the case of Hockney, sophisticated in the case of Allen Jones. It may be due to the tendency of the British to modify ideas, to assimilate prudently, to balance forces, to postpone full commitment, that English pop art does not possess the density and rigour of New York pop art. The English pop artists were historically prompt - which is admirable; but some fear of

being simple seems to have blocked the full realisation of the style, varied and rich as the area is.

Since pop first appeared on the scene there was speculation as to whether it could, or would, evolve and if so in what direction? Condemned for the first four years as a passing fad, its detractors have still not had the satisfaction of attending the funeral, though it could be argued that the third phase of pop, like the third phase of abstract expressionism, has become redundant. The superficial conventions are easily converted into mannerisms. The force of the original group becomes even more apparent when viewed in the light of its imitators. Now in 1978 pop art has been engaged in an articulate dialogue with current abstraction, forcing a change of attitude toward 'art materials' and 'art-worthy subjects', the original pop artists, like all innovators before them, have altered the way in which we see the world.

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