

ARTFORUM

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Harry Kramer

55 MERCER STREET COOP

Harry Kramer is another. His show at 55 Mercer Street of very large black-and-white geometrical paintings was dedicated to Izaak Walton, who wrote a great deal about fishing, because Kramer is an inveterate angler himself. The paintings (full of angles) are wittily titled with lines about fishing. Kramer has been painting Neoplastically during much of the '60s, consciously trying to invest his former Kline-like imagery with the structural inevitability of a Mondrian. He alternates between black-and-white and color paintings, but for the past few years he has been working primarily in black-and-white. The powerful linear thrust of his recent work is close to that of Al Held, but Held's Baroque geometry is not reflected in the austere expanses of Kramer's light-filled paintings. His faceted, collagelike space is comprised of massive overlapping planes of loosely brushed white paint that is both cool and warm. In much the same way he treats his solid black bars with hard-edged firmness in one area and soft painterliness in another. The edges of the canvas support are part of the subject matter of these paintings because of their reappearance inside the field as heavy, black, angled bands, like frames within the frame knocked askew. In addition to sections of tipped rectangular units cut off by the edges, the paintings contain straight bars that pass across the surface or angle into its depth, and floating black triangles or parts of triangles. The extent to which these various units read as isolated flat shapes, is the extent to which they recall the scattered geometries of late, hard-edged Kandinskys. But for the most part they function spatially in an ambiguous way and the illusion of three-dimensionality conveyed by what looks like edges of invisible planes is tempered by contradictory perspectives and a complex collagelike space.

The numerous palimpsests (like Held's) which mark Kramer's work with the traces of earlier compositions and penciled line indications of other possibilities for the future, provide ample evidence of Kramer's involvement with Expressionist procedures. But there are also many small drips, stumbled passages, and splashes to tell that tale and incidentally to set up the kind of internal scale referents that made even the smallest painting by Franz Kline read large. Kramer is an intuitive painter, constantly adjusting his surfaces, changing his mind about the locations of his forms. He leaves the traces of these decisions behind him, but what he has decided frequently has the infallible construction of a Mondrian. Nothing, apparently, comes easily for him, but when everything works he achieves a marvelous rightness and the sensation of energy caught at the critical moment.

—April Kingsley