

NEW YORK LETTER

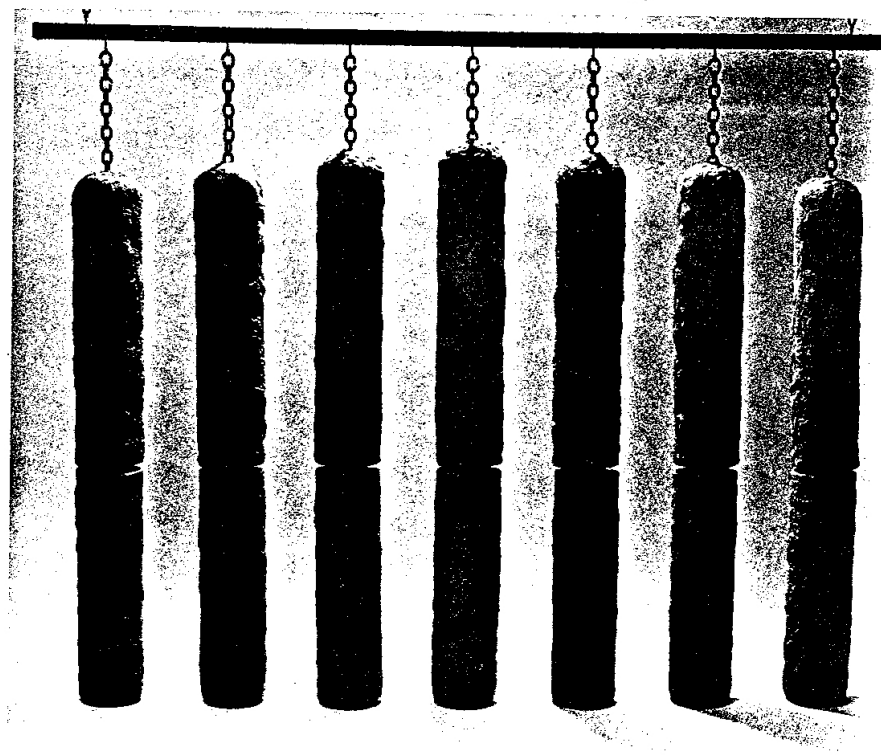
APRIL KINGSLEY

It's called the "Second Annual Contemporary Reflections" exhibition by the Larry Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut, but for as long as I can remember Mr. Aldrich has been mounting similar shows of recently collected works. The emphasis has usually been on young or unexposed artists, lacking gallery affiliations, who sell directly to Mr. Aldrich from their studios. This sort of procedure ought to assure the show a freshness otherwise only found at this time of year in gallery "new talent" exhibitions. Something seemed to go wrong this year, however, and despite the presence of a fair number of excellent works, the show had a depressing air. The ambience shared something with that of a class on the first day of school which is filled with scrubbed faces, neatly combed hair and pressed clothes; uncomfortable but well-behaved students doing their best to please the teacher. Not that the work was amateurish; it just seemed to be trying too hard to please. It was studiously well-crafted, eye-catching, "different", but not much more.

Transcending the general level of blandness were the constructions of Jackie Ferrara, Richard Nonas, and Donald Sunseri. Four mixed media wall, or wall and floor, pieces had a kind of magical potency. These were by Michelle Stuart, Ree Morton, Arlene Schloss and Louis Lieberman. Among the most effective paintings were those of Victor Atkins, Bob Yucikas and Fred Brown.

Nearly half the artists in this show were women, many of whom are doing excellent work—Vivian Scott, Mary Obering, Nancy Genn, Abigail Gerd and Joyce Cole, in particular. I wish it were possible to report that such a large female participation had resulted in a show of truly outstanding quality.

Peter Agostini has always seemed particularly attached to rounded, bulbous forms, be they ab-

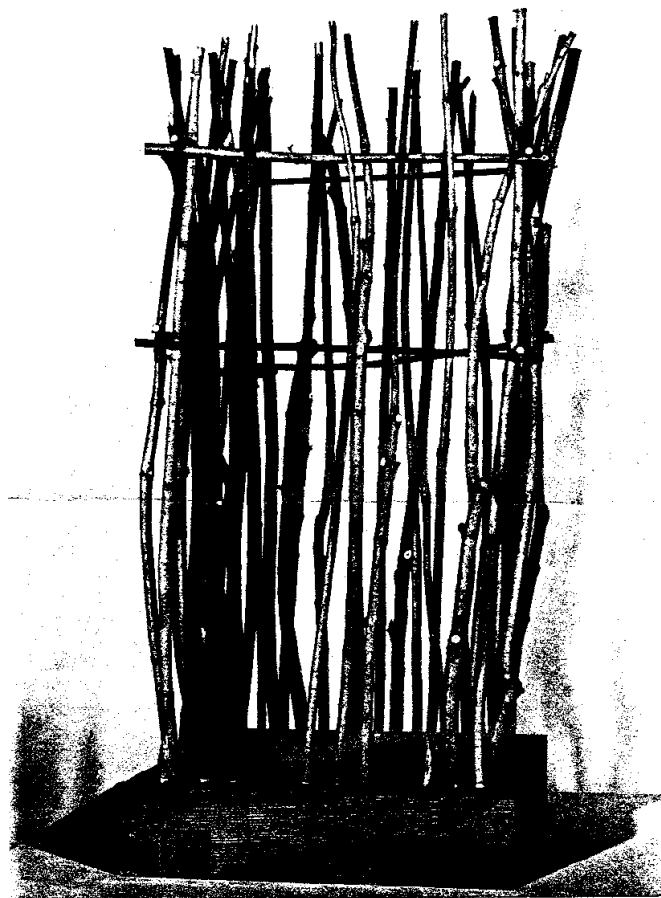


Jackie Ferrara. Untitled 7-unit construction, 1972. Cotton batting, wood, chain, 69" x 90" x 7". Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Conn.

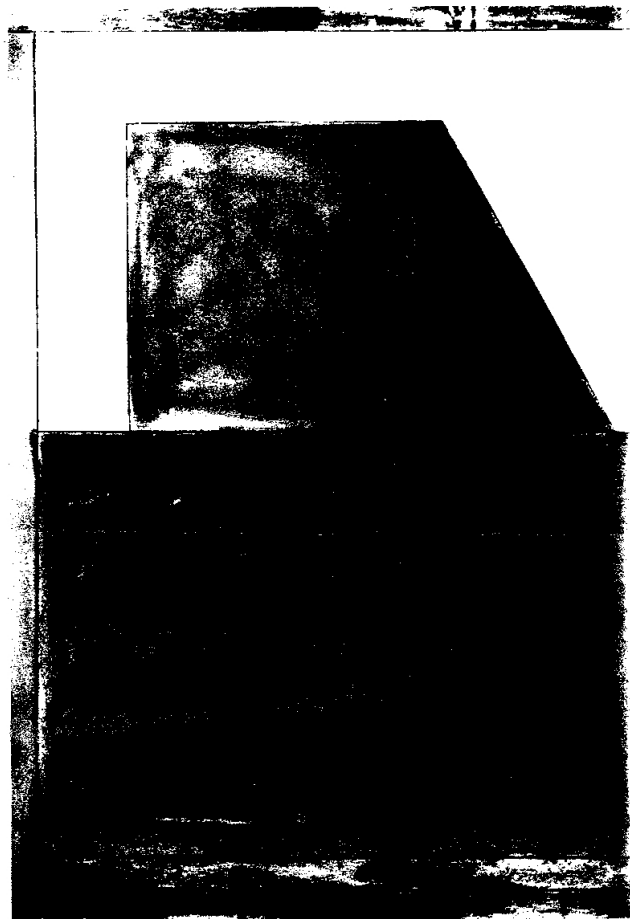
stract balloon-like shapes or figures. His exhibition at the Zabriskie Gallery last spring indicated that he is in a figurative cycle; it concentrated on heads—rotund, neckless, ovoid ball-like heads. Puffy cheeks and fully convex chins and craniums pre-

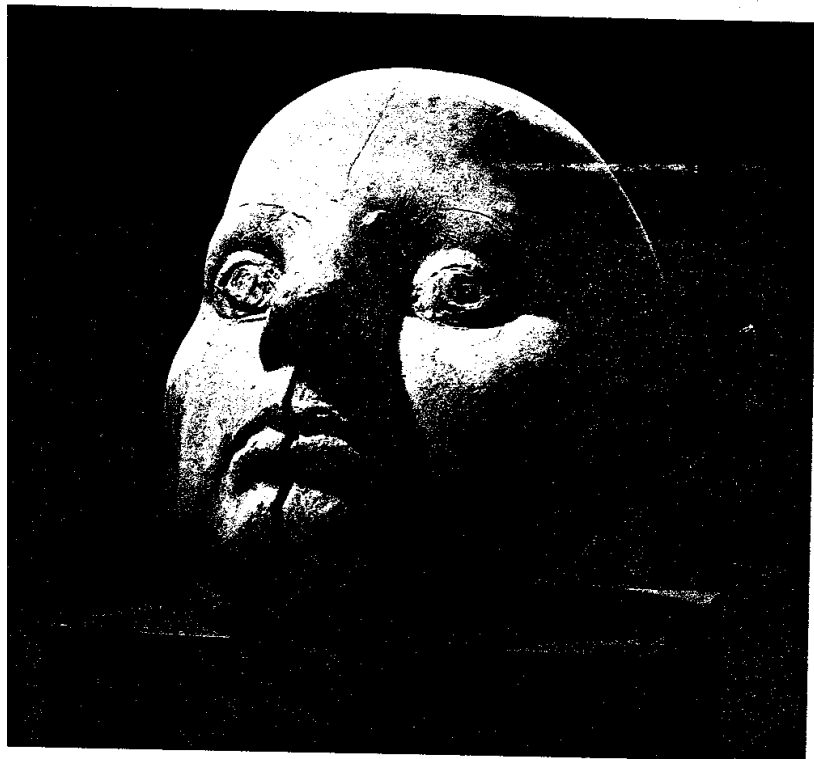
dominated, unmarred by hair or much textural detailing. Some of the heads approached the mental simplicity of Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse*; some of them were portrait-like; while others seemed highly abstracted. Some of the female heads v-

Don Sunseri. *Cubby*, 1973. Sticks and wood base, 33" x 15" x 15". Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Conn.

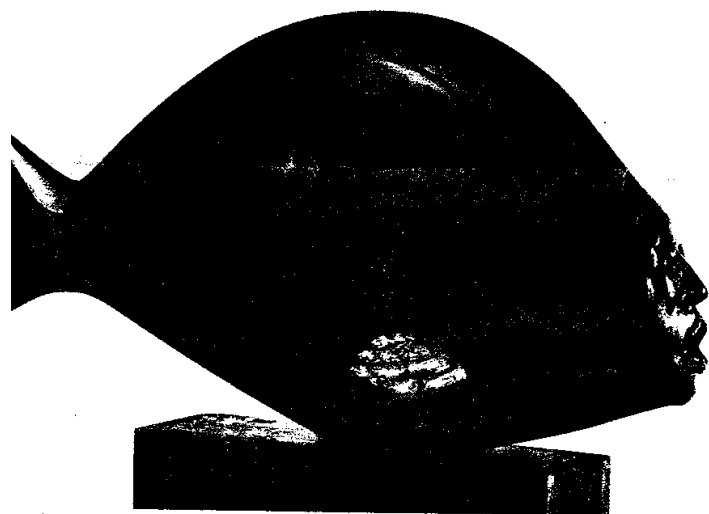


Joe Stefanelli. *Sakkara PM*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 71½ x 51" (see page 10). The New Bertha Schaefer Gallery





Top, Agostini. *Big Doll's Head, 2, 1972*. Terracotta 20½" × 32" × 22". Zabriskie Gallery. Center, Bultman. *Crater, 1972*. Bronze on steel (cire perdue, unique cast). Martha Jackson Gallery. Bottom, Marisol. *Green Fish, 1970*. Wood, plastic, plaster, 18½" × 37" × 7½". Sidney Janis Gallery



globular massings of hair referred directly to Matisse's great *Jeanette I-V* series. Their simultaneous particularity and abstractness served as the connecting link between the two sides of his style and elucidated his formal conceptions for the viewer. The show was chock-full of material for thought and brought to mind many of the great sculptors of this century. It almost seemed as though it might have been conceived as an *homage* to some of them. There were correspondences, for instance, with the fecund obesity of Lachaise's buxom female figures. There were reverberations from the whole history of figurative sculpture, from Indian temple carvings, Egyptian mummies and Fontainebleau mural confectionary to Surrealist mannequins. Agostini seems to have located an inexhaustible mine of subject matter in these heads, a mine producing singularly personal, yet endlessly variable ore. Three gigantic terracotta heads dominated the show—*Big Doll's Head #1, #2, and Fragment*. They all had an antique flavor, as though they'd recently been salvaged from the dusty corner of some Roman museum; their gigantism related to Imperial Roman sculptural rhetoric. Of the three, I found the strongest work to be the complete head with a vertical split running from the chin to the tip of the nose. Pencil thin eyebrows, roughly textured eyes, ears and lips (which seemed to simulate the ravages of time) contrasted with the smooth surface of the rest of the head. Minute scratches, tiny lumps, seam marks and other accidental traces of the piece's fabrication were judiciously allowed to remain in order to enliven the bland smoothness of the surface of this piece in a minimally tactile manner. The fragmented head seemed to exploit the "antique look" too frankly, while the *Big Doll's Head #1* seemed to have a too obviously contemporary look to echo the history of sculpture in a satisfying way.

Fritz Bultman's exhibition of unique lost wax bronzes entitled "Passages through Fire" at the Martha Jackson Gallery last spring was small, but fascinating. Opportunities to see Bultman's work are unfortunately quite rare, despite the fact that he has been a figure on the New York art scene since the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. He is a multi-faceted artist, equally at home in the mediums of sculpture, abstract painting, figural drawing or collage. Perhaps this diversification detracts somewhat from the impact his work might otherwise make on the art world. If so, that is a shame, as Bultman is a truly fine artist in each medium. He draws frequently from the model and his paintings are abstracted in a non-specific way from these drawings. When working in sculpture he works directly in wax or plaster, and then casts the pieces in bronze. Though the sculpture has a decidedly organic quality, as if derived from parts of human or animal skeletal anatomy, it too is highly abstract and non-specific. But, unlike his painting which is structured out of smoothly swelling curves and is hard-edged and simplified, the sculpture is roughly textured, full of surface incident, and seems raw or "unfinished". Bultman's oversize collages are his most purely abstract and least organic works. They have a great deal in common with the mechanical-architectural world of Léger and Picabia, in fact, though sweeping curves often predominate in them as well. These curves provide one of the few connecting links between the many sides of Bultman's style. The play of curves, of concavities and convexities, of ovoid holes and their edges, is especially crucial in his sculpture. There he stresses organic connotations of pelvic saddles, rib cages, craniums and torsos with twisting curling strips of bronze. The recent series of black patina bronzes from 1967-1972 is highly evocative. Their "burnt look" makes them seem like the charred remains of living creatures and gives them a disturbing force lacking in the rest of his gentler, more lyrical work. Though they share something of the urgency of Seymour Lipton's or Theodore Roszak's more expressionistic work, they are not rhetorical. In this one respect

they bring to mind the serene classicism of Reuben Nakian. What is needed is a large, retrospective exhibition of the whole range of Bultman's work in order to be able to begin a proper assessment of his contribution. It isn't possible to give him his due on the basis of the tantalizing taste of it we are given in this small exhibition.

In a surprise move, that seems at once progressive and retrogressive, Alan Cote has turned his back on the color, dynamism, and hard-edged clarity that characterized his previous painting style. Instead, in his Spring show at the Cunningham-Ward Gallery, he is making a major shift toward both painterliness and limiting his means. Utilizing a medium-thick impasto to enliven his grounds, he has reduced his linear activity to horizontal and vertical bands and his color to stark light-dark contrasts, with a Mondrian-like asceticism. Formerly, numerous ribbons of flat color activated the surface of his paintings coloristically as well as structurally. Now, only four rectilinear units per painting, each connected with one of the four edges of the canvas, delineate the painting field. These bands are crisply edged, as before, but now they function in marked contrast to the rest of the painting surface which is covered with thick waves of coruscant pigment. Each of the four rectangular blocks is differently sized in width and length and the fine tuning of these scalar adjustments is an essential aspect of the new work. Their relative dynamism is a function of their abrupt discontinuation shortly after their emergence into the field, and energizes the painting space. These factors, plus the lively surface facture and the large scale of the paintings, clearly removes them from the Constructivist or neo-plastic sphere from which they would seem to descend. They have a great deal in common with the muscular geometry of Al Held or Budd Hopkins, and in particular, with the huge, thrusting, black and white canvases of Harry Kramer. Though I have always regarded Cote's work with esteem, I am convinced that these new dichotomous, rigorous and energetic paintings are his best to date. They confirm my conviction that we are witnessing a genuine attempt to fuse the painterly freedom of Abstract-Expressionism with the structural principles of the most rigorous twentieth-century European abstraction.

Marisol Escobar's recent sculptures at the Sidney Janis Gallery seemed remarkably far removed from her familiar chunky personages of the past. Except for one coarsely chiselled fish-headed standing human figure, all the works were sleekly fashioned mahogany and plastic fish, many with human faces. (The show also included 10 landscape pastels in garish hues, the horizon lines of which arced as though viewed through a distorting

"fish-eye" lens.) But Marisol is a sculptor first and she attends to the details of her craft with great attention. Staining her naturally reddish wood green, brown or black and sanding it to a fine finish before varnishing it to a mirror-like gloss, she calls a maximum amount of our attention to her surfaces. This is, in a sense, a ruse to distract us from the work's content. She has employed similar tactics throughout her career. In the heyday of Pop Art, despite the possibility that she might have wished to detach herself from that label, her work had an undeniably "popular" flavor which functioned to camouflage its deeply obsessive content. Aside from autobiographical implications, there were no explanations for those personages, any more than there are now for the sudden appearance of these new slippery fish. Yet, throughout her work, there runs a deep thread of necessity, a surreal and meaningless but essential content which prevents it from seeming merely chic. Narcissism has always been one of the primary constituents of this content; her off-beat humor is another. Both of these factors were in full operation in the fish where her face replaced their heads, and in the fish-headed man. She is a cagey artist. She offers the viewer a handle on her work, but when it is grasped, its attachment to anything substantial disappears. Her major piece—an erect, fish-headed, part man, part woman holding a blue plastic fish in one hand—exemplifies this. It would seem that she is making highly specific mythological references in the piece, and yet the symbolism is elusive. The *Fishman*, as he is called, would have seemed quite at home in a painting by Magritte; its composite character would have made it a good choice for inclusion in a Surrealist exhibition of mannequins by Masson, Seligmann or Ernst. But its scale, its non-specific iconography, its humorous incongruity and its borderline banality, fix it firmly within the time-frame of American post-Pop imagery.

Now that Picasso is gone and only Miró remains to represent the height of this century's School of Paris accomplishment, it is most appropriate that he has been the subject of considerable attention this year in New York. His large Guggenheim Museum show concentrated on iconographical findings and formal parallels between early and late paintings. This approach was beneficial in that it explored an area previously shrouded in mystery, but detrimental to Miró's artistic standing in general as it eliminated (of necessity) many of Miró's greatest paintings, those of the thirties and early forties. An exhibition of paintings, gouaches, etchings, wall-hangings, and sculpture executed between 1956 and the present, mounted by the Pierre Matisse Gallery late this spring, has done much to rectify this situation. It included one



Miró. *Femme*, 1969. Bronze, height 41½". Pierre Matisse Gallery

painting on tanned animal hide, one on burlap as well as three large mixed-media "Sobreteixim". These are wall-hangings of roughly matted woven fibers that are partially painted and which are attached hunks of yarn and rope, swatches of painted canvas, wire screening and cardboard. These new works are particularly coarse, inelegant, even brutal, but many of the more subdued paintings in the show were executed with a similar broadness and expressive freedom. Miró seems to have benefited more than most of his European peers from the gestural emancipation of Abstract Expressionism.

Alan Cote. *Untitled*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 7'6" x 7'6". Cunningham Ward



Robert Yucikas. *Untitled*, 1972. Acrylic on canvas, 61½" x 61½". The Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield

