

# New Imagery Keeps Its Cool

By April Kingsley

The hollow sound of that old refrain—the return of realism—is to be heard throughout the art world once again, thanks to the Whitney Museum of American Art's exhibition of *New Image Painting* (945 Madison Avenue to January 28). But like the *Modern's New Images of Man* show 20 years ago, the work on view fails to cohere into a strong enough movement to deflect the course of mainstream art.

Emulating the cool, uncommitted aspect of the '60s, new image painting is large-scale, artificial, and intellectual. The artists use a variety of strategies to maintain distance from their subjects; Nicholas Africano, Denise Green, Neil Jenny, Lois Lane, and Robert Moskowitz isolate theirs in miniature form within vast painted fields; Susan Rothenberg, David True, and Michael Hurson neutralize them through repetition, as does Jennifer Bartlett, who programs them conceptually through a range of stylistic permutations. All the artists lavish attention on technical operations and/or surface (though none as compulsively as Joe Zucker) and

many are accomplished, even brilliant, imitators of the childlike and naive, which serve to transform the imagery into signs.

In the '60s, signification became a substitute for significance under the aegis of Pop Art. As Lawrence Alloway phrased it: "The factual definition" of signs and objects presented a possible mode of work that was ironically distanced. The human traces are there, but implied and not insistent, and characterized by some deception." Despite Curator Richard Marshall's efforts in dry, obscurantist prose, we remain unconvinced of the new image painting's connections with Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. (When will curators and critics give up that misleading habit?) Obviously, Pop Art's ambivalent attitude toward the subject is relevant, not profound expressionist commitment. De Kooning's woman bursts her frame, threatening to overwhelm you with her presence, whereas the new image figuration is engulfed by huge empty areas of "pure" painting; Pollock's drip is the track of an emotion, a record of his feelings, while the new image surface is activated by one or another trademark process in the manner of Billy Al Bengston, Jules Olitski, or the nonchalant style of Johns. Actually, the closest Pop connections are to Californians, especially Ed Ruscha.

Some of the work that looks terribly barren in situ comes across well in reproduction, especially with Moskowitz and Rothenberg, though Moskowitz's *Swimmer* has a compelling dramatic force even when seen full-size. Nothing redeems the emptiness of Denise Green's paintings. David True did more interesting work in the past, when he elaborately documented invented histories, though his recent ship paintings have a curiously abstracted quality that adds a touch of mystery to their other wise banal smoothness. Nicholas Africano and Lois Lane place small images in large unstructured areas, but

adjust their scale so finely that they seem "right" whether seen "in person" or in reproduction. I find Africano's studied poses a mite cute, whether in *Dancing* or in *Cruel Discussion*, but Lois Lane's new "black" paintings represent the fulfillment of this new imagery's potential for mystery, surface beauty, and a sense, however duplicitous, of meaningfulness. Despite the cartoon simplicity of her animals and clothesline garments, something of Redon and Mallarmé can be glimpsed within the darkling, nocturnal depths of her strange canvases.

Frankly, with the sole exception of Lane, the new imagery isn't effective on a large scale. Hurson, for instance, is wiped out even by easel-size pictures. He does his best work in dense, magical architectural models, but even then an imagined comparison with Ira Joel Haber's surreal-expressionist manipulations exposes Hurson's blandness. Inch for inch, you'll find more compelling use of fantasy and myth, as well as better paint handling technique, in Robert Henry's modestly curated invitational exhibition, *From the Imagination*, (at the Bowery and Green Mountain Galleries, 135 Greene Street, to January 3). Without abandoning traditional attitudes or normal size, many of the 45 artists—particularly Bill Anthony, Robert Beauchamp, John Dobbs, Mary Frank, Michael Mazur, George McNeil, Peter Passuntino, Gerald Samuels, Sal Sirugo, Carl Titolo, and Selena Trieff—have invented a host of provocative "new images" that nevertheless continue a profound tradition of humanistic commitment.

Taking a serious approach to heavy subject matter may not be "in" these post-Pop days, but that isn't the only reason the FRIDA KAHLO (1910-1954) retrospective didn't make it into one of the major New York City museums. You will have to take an hour's trip to Purchase to see it—at the Neuberger Mu-

# ART

seum of the State University—before it ends its nationwide tour on January 14, when much of the work will return to her native Mexico. Kahlo has become not only a heroine of the feminist art movement, but a patron saint, if not a martyr, to the cause. Though she suffered innumerable operations and immeasurable pain during the 29 years she survived a nearly fatal bus collision at the age of 15, she produced a body of work so powerful in its expressive force, so convincingly generated from a female experience of the body, that tears ran down more than one face at the opening. Some of the paintings are almost unbearably moving (*The Broken Column*, 1944, where her braced torso is riddled with sharp tacks and rent down the middle to expose a fractured Ionic column—an ironic but devastating stand-in for her own shattered spine) or painfully graphic (*Childbirth*, 1932, where only her head has been delivered from her dead mother's body; *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932, where she lies on a blood-soaked bed attached by blood lines to a fetus and other sexual symbols; *A Few Small Nips*, 1935, where blood stains cover the frame as well as the image of a murdered nude woman). She ranges from primitive "retablo" archaism to direct, sophisticated symbolism to overtly surreal imagery. She also attempted grandiose "history painting" in the mural style of her husband, Diego Rivera, as well as monumental portraiture, the finest of which is the *Portrait of Rosita Morillo*, 1944. Two of her greatest paintings—*The Two Fridas*, 1939, and *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940—are unfortunately not included in the show, but it is a tribute to her ability that they are hardly missed. ■

## OOBS

Continued from page 81

Jan 5-22, Fri, Sat, and Mon at 8, Sun at 3. Impossible Racine

**IS THERE SEX AFTER BIRTH?** by Pascual Vaquer, dir by Rosann Weeks, to Jan 16, Thurs-Sat at 8. Play Factor, 692 Greenwich St at Christopher, 243-3035 (\$3).

**LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN**, by

the-Village, 224 Waverly Pl, 242-0530 (\$6).

**PORNO STARS AT HOME**, by Leonard Melfi, dir by Ken Eulo, on Thurs, Fri at 8, Sat 7 and 10:30, Sun at 7. Courtyard Playhouse.

man, on Wed-Sat at 8. Time and Space Ltd Thr, 139-41 W 22nd, 741-1032, 243-9268 (\$3).

**SALOME**, dir by Steven Baker, on Wed-Fri and Sun at 8, Sat at 10, 114 W 14th, 929-2999 (\$3).

425 Lafayette, 677-6350 (free). **SUCCESSI** musical by Steven Melay, on Sun-Tue at 7:30, 13th St Thr, 50 W 13th, 741-9282, (\$4). **THE THREE CUCKOLDS**,

commedia dell'arte scenario, on

**TOTAL RECALL**, by Martin Helpem, dir by Ronald Roston, to Dec 27-31, Tue-Fri at 11 p.m. Circle Repertory, 99 7th Av S, 924-7100 (\$3).

**TROUBLE IN MIND**, Alca, Chil