

American Painting and Pop Art*

Although this exhibition is the first to attempt a collective look in considerable depth at the current phenomenon of what for the time being is broadly labeled as Pop Art¹ (as well as those artists who now appear as harbingers of this new art), it has been preceded by a series of important museum exhibitions within the last year that have examined various aspects of the heterogeneous activity:

September 1962 "The New Painting of Common Objects"
organized by Walter Hopps at the Pasadena Art Museum

March 1963 "Six Painters and the Object"
organized by Lawrence Alloway at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

April 1963 "Popular Art"
organized by Mr and Mrs C. Buckwalter at the Nelson Gallery of the Atkins Museum, Kansas City

April 1963 "Pop Goes the Easel"
organized by Douglas MacAgy at the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston

April 1963 "The Popular Image Exhibition"
organized by Alice Denney at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art

July 1963 "Six More"
organized by Lawrence Alloway at the Los Angeles County Museum (mainly a repeat of the Pasadena Exhibition) and show with the traveling version of "Six Painters and the Object"

Abstract Expressionism, the first brilliant flowering of a distinctly American sensibility in painting, is a movement in which the prime innovators and the most important artists are largely based in New York. Another characteristic is that, without exception, all the early work of the painters in this movement can be seen as a direct

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confrontation of, and struggle with, the dominating influences of European painting. In contrast, Pop Art reveals a complete shift of emphasis in both geographical location and subject matter. The first body of work that has emerged from this new movement is widely dispersed between the two coasts – this simultaneous eruption is an important factor neglected by all the organizers of previous exhibitions, with the exception of Pasadena's "New Painting of Common Objects." It points up several aspects of the new art that have received little consideration in the past. The curious phenomenon, particularly in these times of easy communication, of a group of artists widely separated geographically, who appear at roughly the same time with images startlingly different from those which dominated American painting for two decades and yet strikingly similar to each other's work, points to the workings of a logic within the problems of American painting itself rather than to the logic of dealers and pressure groups. If the logic of Abstract Expressionism was hammered out in fiery quarrels in Greenwich Village bars by the most intensely speculative group of painters America has yet produced, the logic of this new art, by a quite different but equally valid process, forced itself on artists geographically isolated from one another and yet faced with the same crisis.

The subject matter most common to Pop Art is for the most part drawn from those aspects of American life which have traditionally been a source of dismay to American intellectuals, and a source of that glib derision of "American culture" so common among Europeans: the comic strip, mass-media advertising, and Hollywood. Some critics argue that the employment of this subject matter places the artists in the morally indefensible position of complacent – if not joyous – acceptance of the worst aspects of American life. Others, however, insist upon finding a negative moral judgment implicit in the work. The artists, for the most part, remain silent or, worse, perversely make public statements feeding the fury of the party they consider more absurd. For of course neither position approaches the real problems of this new art or searches the nature of the crisis which has brought it forth. That crisis is essentially the same crisis the Abstract Expressionist painters faced, and solved so brilliantly in their own way: the problem of creating a distinctly American painting, divorced from the stylistic influences and

esthetic concerns of a tradition of European art which has lain like a frigid wife in the bed of American art since the Armory show. (And why hasn't anyone seen the re-creation of the Armory show as the greatest irony possible in the light of this new American painting?) If, during the last decade, Abstract Expressionism has been thought of – at least in this country – as finally having solved the problem of the creation of a distinctly American art, here is a whole new generation which has engendered widespread confusion by thinking otherwise. Seen from this point of view the painters of the soup can, the dollar bill, the comic strip, have in common not some moral attitude toward their subject matter that some say is positive and others say is negative, *but a series of painting devices which derive their force in good measure from the fact that they have virtually no association with a European tradition.* The point is so utterly plain that one is astonished at how often it has been missed. For these artists, the Abstract Expressionist concern with gesture, with the expressive possibilities of sheer materials is out – *all* Expressionistic concerns (and Impressionistic ones as well), abstract or otherwise, are out. A sophisticated concern with compositional techniques, formal analysis or drawing, is also out, and indeed Lichtenstein will depart from his usual comic-strip paintings to lampoon a famous Picasso Cubist painting, or a well-known art book's diagramming of the composition of an important Cézanne.

A further challenge to this new direction in art is that of shallowness. This condemnation is based upon the principle that transformation *must occur* in order to differentiate an art image from a similar image in the real world. Certain artists within the broad category of the movement, it is claimed, in particular Warhol and Lichtenstein, fail to effect such a transformation, and if they do, it is so minute as to be of relatively no importance. The very essence of this new art lies precisely in its complete break from a whole tradition of European esthetics. This is accomplished by the particular choice of subject matter which is put into a new fine art context. This *is* the transformation.

While it would seem neither to damn nor approve the material of its inspiration – indeed to appear totally disinterested in the moral problems it raises – Pop Art does take subtle and incisive advantage of deeply rooted cultural meanings and demonstrates how for the artist

the seemingly common and vulgar everyday images, messages and artifacts of a mass-communicating and consuming society can give rise to the deepest metaphysical speculations. Warhol's rigid, simple, mass-produced, and standardized symmetry is only a point of departure behind which lies an assertive individuality, despite his non-committal painting technique. Hefferton's deliberate and highly disciplined suppression of the decorative quality of paint by substituting a non-esthetic and primitive handling is also totally personal and at the same time his images insidiously recall a host of associations concerning "political expediency." Lichtenstein's flattened, blown-up, and arrested images from the comics subtly pose real issues of the crisis of identity. In contrast to these three, Goode in his highly ambiguous milk bottle paintings employs a rich sensuous quality of paint. Oldenberg's painted plaster edibles parody the anxious, violent type of caricature and expressive use of color that has marked so much of modern art since Van Gogh but which has now become an inexpressive formal device and cliché in academic circles. If some of these images are deadpan, an underlying violence seeps through as in Ruscha's calculated word images.³ Blossum's cool, detached and simply painted monotone image of twenty-five minutes ticking away on a parking meter may appear indifferent to the tortured quality of life, the subject matter of the human condition painters, but it is in fact loaded with suppressed anxiety.

What at first sight appears to be a rather restricted movement employing a narrow range of imagery is in fact enormously rich in the variety of artists it encompasses; at the same time this is not meant to imply that there are no sharp qualitative differences among these artists as in those of any other movement. What is of intense interest, however, is that these artists are looking at and using the most thoroughly and massively projected images of our time – images so looked at that they have become accepted, overlooked and unseen – as a raw material for art.

The emergence of this new art forces the re-evaluation of those artists in the past who have seemed merely eccentric or whose imagery and direction seemed peripheral to the course of American painting since World War II. Obviously Stuart Davis and Gerald Murphy, both considerably influenced by Léger, anticipate certain aspects of Pop Art

in imagery and technique – Davis for his use of blown-up sign fragments and references to popular culture and jazz, Murphy for his billboard style and American vulgarism. A more recent forerunner activity than that of Davis and Murphy spanned the last fifteen years in various cities. In Paris it was the American expatriate William Copley, a post-Surrealist with images full of cheesecake eroticism, patriotic folklore and sophisticated vulgarism. In New York were Larry Rivers with an imagery derived from American folklore and contemporary popular sources, but without the radical innovation of technique that would separate his work from Abstract Expressionism, and Ray Johnson, a pioneer in the use of the cheapest graphic techniques. In San Francisco Wally Hedrick traced ironic reflections onto radios, television cabinets, and refrigerators, and Jess Collins “rewrote” the action and content of comic strips by collaging within existing printed images. Another curious figure is Von Dutch Holland, the southern Californian hot rod striper, a genuinely popular artist whose eccentric imagery and high craft technique combined with a visionary attitude was admired by younger artists. The two key and most significant artists who are usually included within the Pop category are Jasper Johns³ and Robert Rauschenberg, but they should rather be regarded as direct precursors who provided the momentum, concentrated insights and focus of ideas that triggered the broad breakthrough of this new art, Rauschenberg for his concern with art as a *direct* confrontation of life, transforming his environment into art in a strange, compelling new way, and Johns for the potent questions he raised on the discontinuous quality of symbols. Billy Al Bengston⁴ appears to be one of the first artists to have recognized exactly what Johns and Rauschenberg were opening up from 1959 on he completed a broad spectrum of work within the new idiom, but his more recent penumbric, hard-surfaced optical images are more concerned with a heightened awareness of the strange beauty and perfection of materials and have little to do with Pop Art.

Notes

1. A phrase coined by Lawrence Alloway in the early fifties to describe the strong forerunner activity in this direction by Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton and others in London. Its subsequent usage cannot, however, be made his responsibility.

The value of Alloway's consistent insight into this movement, incidentally, cannot be overestimated.

2. Ruscha is the first artist in the movement to have published, in an edition of one hundred copies, a book entitled *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*. A series of photographed images, it should be regarded as a small painting.

3. See Alan R. Solomon's perceptive introduction to the catalog of "The Popular Image Exhibition" at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, 1963, for a statement on Rauschenberg's and Johns' contribution.

4. Dine, who occupies a halfway position between assemblage and the new art, had a one-man exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, in January 1962. It was Bengston's dealer, Irving Blum of the Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles, who gave the first one-man exhibition in July of 1962 to Warhol, a critical artist in the new movement who made a clean break with his Campbell's Soup Can series.