Celebrating 175: Exhibition File, James Rosenquist, 1964 October 27

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Boshier's non-rectangular paintings exploit some of the possibilities of optical illusion. He creates three-dimensional effects through irregular shaping of the canvas according to perspective lines determined by the imagery used; he also tries for optical stimulation through reversible figure-ground relationships. In "Vegas,"for example, a rhombic form is punningly superimposed over a "background" rectangle patterned in red and yellow zig-zags. His other large untitled canvas uses horizontal wavy bands of red and blue, which alternately become figure and ground, and which contain ropelike verticals swirling downward. Although "Vegas" comes on as mathematics, its overall effect is no less romantic than that of the wavy untitled painting. The surfaces of both are mat; the colors, supposedly influenced by a stay in India, are curiously muted, given Boshier's apparent intentions. These paintings neither seek nor achieve the formal clarity and presence of the best American optical painting, but they do have an easy vitality. Boshier's is an amusement park world, a funhouse geometry, even if he is finally not with it.

Bridget Riley's austere black and white paintings, on the other hand, are more purely optical. One thinks of Bauhaus and Vasarely. "Stretch," a square with geodesic longings and patterned in herringbone, is an impeccable exercise in rhythm and space. "Hidden Squares" cleanly presents checkerboard and polka dots in energetic interrelation. Though Miss Riley's aspirations are modest, her paintings, within the formal limitations she sets, are highly satisfying.

Allen Jones' two large paintings "Red Girl" and "Woman" fail somewhere between soft Pop and Hard-Edge abstraction. His gynecomorphous imagery and sweetly attractive colors function less successfully in purely plastic terms than they do as Pop content; but the size of his canvases and the distortions employed force one to consider them in abstract terms as well. In "Woman," for example, the blue, hard-edged shape which forms the backdrop for the female figure is uninventive and compositionally weak; the sexually allusive Jenkinsian forms within have a certain bravura art nouveau success, but no connection to what goes on without. The Leger legs of the "Red Girl" are another instance of forms that effectively startle as content, but offend in plastic terms——i.e., the sporadic illusionistic treatment of space has no formal justification. Jones' lively series of prints, "Concerning Marriage," is broadly comic in the Henry Fielding-Kingsley Amis tradition (the last print like the punch line of an old joke), the satire something less than Hogarthian.

During the early weeks of the show, only one small painting and two drawings by David Hockney (recently referred to as "Top Pop" in England) had been received. The painting, "Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles," is charming in an artless way, but the two drawings demonstrate a superb feeling for line and an interesting wittiness. Peter Phillips' involuted drawings stay closer to Pop, as do the NASA astronauts of Gerald Laing's silver, red, and white postcards from American outer space.

This is a timely show, if not, unfortunately, a timeless moment in British art. The excitement of experimentation is too often tempered by imitativeness and a lack of virtuosity. Perhaps the New Generation is ripe for a British Scholar Address,

N.M.

[underlined] JAMES ROSENQUIST, Dwan Gallery:[/underlined] As slippery, agreeable and conventional as an ad man at a client's party, Rosenquist nevertheless makes us aware of his attitudes in his big chopped-up ads and billboard sections. He persistently presents a picture of harebrained noninvolvement, sneaking in his comment so quietly that we are never certain we have not made it up for ourselves. His is a world of inescapable superficiality.

He necessarily comments upon a dead idea...Shaw said that was the fate of those who comment. He talks of a world created by vulgar advertising. But after all there is another world of advertising that is tenaciously tasteful and art-oriented. Rosenquist is not interested because he pretends not to be interested in art. His comments become current by association. Two large panels that derive from old "T-zone" ads become current by their association with the lung cancer fuss. They are about a big pretty lie from a day for which we might long, a day when the simple pleasure of smoking was not accompanied by a reasonable certainty that we are committing suicide in the process. Nobody can say for sure that this is Rosenquist's idea. He doesn't force it.

Any estimate slips maddeningly off the mark. More clearly than any of his deadpan soulmates, Lichtenstein or Warhol or Rauschenberg, Rosenquist is a purist of denial who only affirms that things are, or were, bright, phony and impersonal. If we cannot be sure he is concerned with cancer we can be sure he is with consumption. Mass consumption of artificial goods. Every work is of artificial stuff (he delights in the obviously heightened color of canned fruit salad) made even more artificial by use of a technique as rigid as that of the Egyptians; the ad technique whose basic tenet is "Thou shalt not offend." The purity that is his necessarily reminds us of other artistic purists but Rosenquist will not be cornered. A painting showing a hand holding a piece of Swiss cheese might make one think he was interested in spatial play but he cuts the whole thing up like a jigsaw puzzle and reaffirms the flat. What holds him about the head of Joan Crawford in a cigarette-ad fragment is not the roundness of the orbs or the sculptural quality of her cheekbones but the machine-like phoniness of its split lids and its mouth of plastic smoothness.

Rosenquist accepts esthetics as snobbery, and anger as absurd. If his energetic color reminds you of Stuart Davis, he makes it clear that these bright things are not of his making, they are the result of one impression of a color-plate in a set of progressive proofs.

Do we see a snide reference to his view of Abstract Expressionism in certain backgrounds and in a carelessly left paint rag? Rosenquist will not cop out. Is he interested in a refined shape? He makes spaghetti and Crawford's hair out of the same stuff. Finally we begin to sink into the mood. Finally we are assured that we can be carefree because everything is made of plastic ... even plastic we can eat. Then we begin to get a little sick. We think Rosenquist has prodded us to it with that menacing chromium fork of his. Prodded us where we are no longer capable of being shocked. That's pretty good.

W.W.

EDWARD RUSCHA, Ferus Gallery: There is a remarkable tension about this show. No room here for amateurs; sybarites keep out. These are coldly brilliant canvases whose perfection of technique proclaims a hermetic self-sufficiency, an almost depersonalized aloofness. The tension comes in at that "almost." Personality, not through painterly gesture or expressionistic distortion, asserts itself in the surreal clamps and torn western magazine that Ruscha aggressively and ironically adds to his obsessive order, intrudes via the deracinated, the unconnected, the literally conceived object.

The paintings divide into two groups. First, and most impressive, are the two large landscapes which mythologize the heart of peregrinating America - the filling station. "Standard Station, 10c Western Being Torn in Half" presents a surgically sterile image in red, white, and vivid light blue. The vacant station is painted as a lunar architect's plan might be, using hard-edged forms, clean lines, sharply delineated perspectives into airless flat space, and brilliantly stifling color. In the upper right hand corner is a torn western magazine, illusionistically portrayed so as to seem attached to, rather than painted on, the canvas. The placement is surrealistic, the notion poetic; but the ontological gap between magazine and painting is finally impossible to bridge. "Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas" has no such literary devices; the colors, red, white and dark blue, are perhaps less satisfying in their heavy-handed reliance on value contrasts for dramatic effect, but the total image is nevertheless austerely compelling.

The second group contains four small paintings more nearly surreal in their mood, sign paintings. Two, appropriately in this highly professional context, announce the word "BOSS" in orange letters on a dark blue ground. In one, titled "Securing The Last Letter," the clamp which wrenches the final "S" out of the shape is a fink. In the second, "Not Only Securing the Last Letter But Damaging It As Well," the "S" is distorted by two clamps, whose hostile intent is no longer a secret. "Hurting The World Radio #1" and "#2" are variations on the same theme; the yellow letters of the word "RADIO" are now set apart from an electrically light blue ground by the shadows they cast, and once again single letters fall victim to the minatory clamps. The effect of all this clutching is not significantly different from that of the superimposed magazine. The distorted letters, rubbery and agonized, are in direct conflict with the icy formality of stenciled sign on flat ground; they signal impurity in an ambience of mechanical formal means and suggest artistic anxieties about the hegemony of technique. (One thinks of Leger, who said, "Technique must be more and more exact, the execution must be perfect ... I prefer a mediocre painting perfectly executed to a picture, beautiful in intention, but not executed. Nowadays a work of art must bear comparison with any manufactured object. Only the picture which is an object can sustain that comparison and challenge time.") That an intrusion of some sort, however, seems necessary to Ruscha's oeuvre at this time is proven by the poverty of "Dimple," a sign that just lies there.

In short, if some of Ruscha's paintings are unresolved, the best convey of the possibility of an iconographic power of a high order.

N.M.

ARTS OF NEW GUINEA, Municipal Art Gallery: Unlike the Western

artist, the primitive carver gained little from skilled performance alone. His profession was ordained through a variety of

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