

## ART REVIEW

# Palettes Full of Ideas About What Painting Should Be

By ROBERTA SMITH

**N**EW YORK CITY has many things in quantity, and one is surely painting. Moving through its many museums and galleries, you can encounter works by masters long dead and living. You can see brand new works by young unknowns and those of painters who have toiled for years in relative obscurity. They all conspire to make New York one of the world's great centers of painting, and of the debate about painting. For every painting is, among other things, an argument about what painting should be.

At the moment, painting is especially visible, even by New York standards, so the debate is unusually pitched, almost an esthetic war zone. Most prominent, of course, are the major museum retrospectives that bring two of the medium's elder statesmen head to head: Jasper Johns's brooding ambiguities of image and surface, at the Museum of Modern Art, are locked in spirited exchange with Ellsworth Kelly's sometimes dazzling purities of form and color at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Other participants in the debate in Manhattan range from Lucian Freud at Aquavella to Gerhard Richter at Marian Goodman and Eric Fischl at Mary Boone. And, from beyond the grave, from Max Beckmann at the SoHo Guggenheim to Jean-Michel Basquiat at Tony Shafrazi, with Philip Guston at David McKee and Edwin Dickinson at Tibor de Nagy falling somewhere between.

And this is only the top layer. All over town, younger or less well known painters are putting forth their best arguments in the form of painting shows, and it's great fun to get caught in the crossfire. Here is a sampling of those exhibitions.

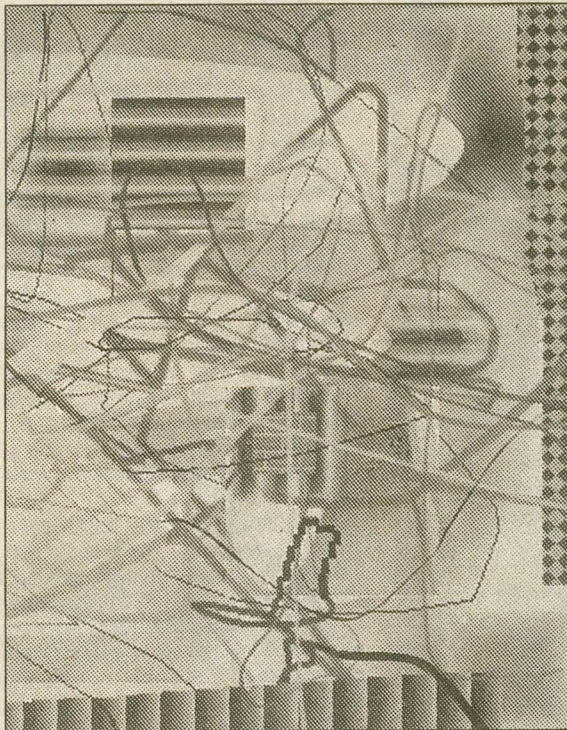
## Louise Fishman

Louise Fishman's argument for a felt, gestural form of abstraction has improved considerably, and by including paintings from the last three years, her current show, at the Robert Miller Gallery on 57th Street, makes the improvement especially clear. This show, her 13th since 1977, is a kind of debate all by itself.

Ms. Fishman seems to be forsaking the hulking, rather bombastic scaffoldings of recent years, represented here by works like "Blonde Ambition" and "Heart in Hand." Her new efforts feel much more painted, rather than clumsily orchestrated for effect, and she seems to tackle a different kind of brushwork each time out.

In "Fire Over the Lake," black, calligraphic strokes slither and curl across a ground of mostly red, bringing Pollock to mind. The soft, muffled blue forms in the white blizzard that is "White Clouds, Blue Mountains" have been both painted and gouged, but to surprisingly gentle effect.

And in the dark fields of "Black Lingbi" and "Mikrokosmos," a combination of slipping, dissolving grids and short, restrained strokes animate the entire surface. Not all the new work is equally good; "Stone Drum" and "Celadon" in particular reveal a penchant for paintings that are awkward and slapdash, if not unfinished. Still, this is Ms. Fishman's best show in several years.



A detail from "A Prehistoric Hand," above, by Albert Oehlen, at Luhring Augustine; "Fire Over the Lake," by Louise Fishman, at Robert Miller.

## David Row

A few floors up from the Fishman show, David Row operates on the assumption that the future of painting is formalist. His big, handsome works at André Emmerich/Sotheby's, as the gallery is now called, layer together complex processes (including templates, screen printing and Richter-like blurs) with an imagery that centers on repeating open ellipses. Across separate panels and multicolored grids, and in lively contrasting colors, these ellipses disintegrate into coiled lines and then big flamelike strokes, with a centrifugal energy that can seem cinematic.

One problem is that the paintings are far too similar, suggesting a carefully evolved process that has gone into overproduction. The sameness from painting to painting underscores another problem, which is that Mr. Row's mysterious processes and layerings are more interesting than the results.

## Albert Oehlen

The messy Popified Expressionism of the German painter Albert Oehlen has always implied that abstract painting should be as nasty and inelegant as it wants to be. But he's never brought it off as well as in his new works at Luhring Augustine in SoHo, although this is not entirely a compliment.

These new efforts are initiated on a computer, whose digitalized graphics make Mr. Oehlen's subversive, antagonistic attitude toward painting sharper, more up front. It also makes his compositions, in which pixelated lines, checks and grids now collaborate with paintbrush and spray can, more original. (The line that twists and turns like a rusted cable through "A Prehistoric Hand," one of the show's better works, partakes of all three painting methods.) The results have a fast-forward automatism: European Tachisme filtered through an East Village comic book and blown up. It's best when

Mr. Oehlen conducts the exercise with loud, fluorescent colors.

## Bill Komoski, Carl Fudge and Jane Fine

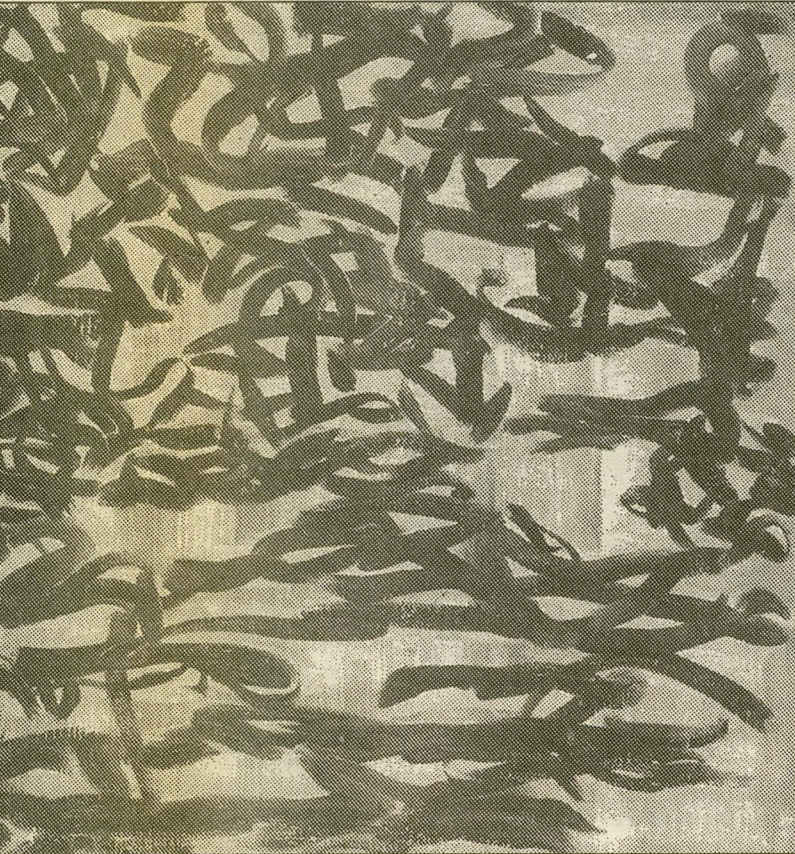
There are a number of other painters exhibiting in SoHo who value thin, weightless compositions or the look, if not the actual use, of the computer. Bill Komoski's big print-like paintings, at Feature, could easily have been lifted from the computer screen, although their bright colors, strange bumps, blank (and sometimes singed) areas suggest burnt and melted versions of Mr. Oehlen's paintings. (Also good at Feature, even if it's not a painting, is a single sculpture by Jim Iserman, a large foam cube covered with specially woven checked fabric that suggests a giant ottoman decorated by Sol LeWitt.)

Carl Fudge's large, intricately patterned paintings, seen in the artist's second solo at the Lauren Wittels Gallery, evoke computer screen savers or unusually fancy Formica; they also owe a considerable debt to Christopher Wool's "wallpaper" paintings. They're actually made with silk-screens whose patterns are derived from motifs borrowed from Japanese ukiyo-e prints, repeatedly photocopied, sliced, diced and reassembled into abstraction.

At Casey Kaplan, next door to Mr. Fudge's show, Jane Fine is showing colorful abstract paintings in which larger biomorphic shapes are defined by small squarish strokes and shapes that bring to mind the computer pixel, even though they are made by hand. Ms. Fine could probably use a little computerization; her art continues to be hampered by conventional paint handling.

## William Wegman

Among the painters who combine recognizable imagery with big doses of abstraction, William Wegman, famous for his photographs of cooperative Weimaraners, continues to be a



minor master. As his show at Jay Gorney Modern Art in SoHo demonstrates, his specialty is thin layers of painterly color that bring to mind lyrical abstraction, a brief painting trend of the late 1960's, when Mr. Wegman was starting out as an artist. These fluctuating fields are then punctuated with tiny figures and objects, converting them into landscape spaces alternately vast or bucolic.

Sometimes it takes almost nothing: a tiny two-mast ship planted at the center of "Lunar Sea," for example, or the regiments of stick figures scattered across the sandy tones of "Civil War." In other instances, like "Tunnel of Sleep" and "Yellow Bridge," we are treated to an encyclopedic trip through different times and places. Mr. Wegman rounds out the show with some watercolors that wittily extend a series of schmaltzy greeting cards into larger landscapes, works very much in the vein of his jokey early drawings but far more skillful.

## Trevor Winkfield

Like Mr. Wegman, the English-born New York painter Trevor Winkfield is bent on a maximum ratio of lightness to intelligence, but his artistic persona is more the sophisticate than the naïf. His paintings, at the Donahue/Sosinski Gallery in SoHo, reveal a preference for hard-edge forms, impeccable compositions and marvelously bracing combinations of primary and pastel colors.

His taut stylized images, reminiscent of encyclopedia illustrations, also have something in common with the dense, slightly Victorian decorativeness of Lari Pittman.

Mr. Winkfield splits the difference between Surrealism and Pop with a seamless collage technique that yields a range of exquisite corpse figures and fractured narratives. Bits of classical architecture and sculpture join forces with everyday objects — food, tools, abstract forms and intimations of the human presence, like the elegantly attired male

leg at the center of "Trapping the Birds and the Bees."

## Lisa Yuskavage

For Lisa Yuskavage, painting is not so much a fusion of representation and abstraction as of political and formal, and maybe high and low. In her New York debut at Boesky & Callery, Ms. Yuskavage continues to define a world of demonically distorted Kewpie-doll women, mostly naked and slothful. These distasteful figures inhabit grounds of smooth, glowing color whose soft, blended pastels evoke generations of girlish color-coordinated bedrooms and outfits distilled into an atmospheric modernist monochrome. Although Ms. Yuskavage is capable of positing a mildly perverse-looking still life in a glowing haze of blue, her real subject seems to be a limited range of "girl secrets," including envy, overeating and overexercising.

"Foodeating Hardplace" focuses attention on the distended stomach and nauseated face of a creature clearly on the verge of tossing her cookies. Meanwhile, the maiden with the upturned buttocks who inhabits the aqua haze of "Wrist Corsage" seems to have spent far too many hours on an Exercycle.

In previous work, Ms. Yuskavage seemed to distort women's bodies in order to reveal the sexualizing or infantilizing tendencies of the male gaze. Now she's working much closer to home, dealing with female self-hatred itself, and this is far nervier and more challenging. But her new target makes some inherent weaknesses more obvious, including the unclear point of view and the slippery, illustrational painting style.

## Julia Jacquette

A feminist painter more clearly on the side of women, if not as ambitious for painting itself, is Julia Jacquette, showing for the first time at the Holly Solomon Gallery in SoHo. Ms. Jacquette draws from a range of

## Where to Find The Galleries

Here is information on the painting shows at Manhattan galleries mentioned in the accompanying art review, in the order mentioned.

LOUISE FISHMAN, Robert Miller Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, through Nov. 16.

DAVID ROW, André Emmerich/Sotheby's, 41 East 57th Street, through Nov. 9.

ALBERT OEHLER, Luhring Augustine, 130 Prince Street, SoHo, through Nov. 16.

BILL KOMOSKI, Feature, 76 Greene Street, SoHo, through Nov. 23.

CARL FUDGE, Lauren Wittels Gallery, 48 Greene Street, SoHo, through Nov. 9.

JANE FINE, Casey Kaplan, 48 Greene Street, SoHo, through Nov. 9.

WILLIAM WEGMAN, Jay Gorney Modern Art, 100 Greene Street, near Prince Street, SoHo, through Nov. 30.

TREVOR WINKFIELD, Donahue/Sosinski Gallery, 560 Broadway, at Prince Street, SoHo, through Nov. 16.

LISA YUSKAVAGE, Boesky & Callery, 51 Greene Street, SoHo, through Nov. 16.

JULIA JACQUETTE, Holly Solomon Gallery, 172 Mercer Street, at Houston Street, SoHo, through tomorrow.

MANUEL OCAMPO, Annina Nosei Gallery, 530 West 22d Street, Chelsea, through Nov. 7.

conventions, especially the old-fashioned illustration, to focus on confused desires and displaced appetites. Her paintings are bright, well made and funny, as in a beautifully painted plate of cold cuts that bears the inscription, "I Can't Get You Out of My Mind."

## Manuel Ocampo

In his second show at the Annina Nosei Gallery in Chelsea, Manuel Ocampo, a Philippine-born artist living in Los Angeles, continues to scale down effects first ventured by Julian Schnabel, deploying them in meditations on history as sarcastic as they are seductive. Sarcasm is reserved for everyone, starting with the Roman Catholic Church, and the results often suggest decaying ex-votos of an especially malignant sort.

In "Uber," the purple robe of a kneeling priest is more Ku Klux Klan than Franciscan, and the cross he bears is actually a bright yellow swastika. In "Macho," pink intestines are topped by a perky dog's head, the combination floating on a landscape. (It is especially reminiscent of Mr. Schnabel's wonderful Kabuki screen paintings of the mid-1980's.)

Mr. Ocampo agitates matters further by defacing the images with obscene graffiti and pictograms. Despite the pirated Neo-Expressionist style, Mr. Ocampo seems more in a class with such talented and uninhibited malcontents as Peter Saul, Jim Nutt and (in his drawings) Raymond Pettibone. There is also the suggestion that the works are altered thrift-store paintings, bringing to mind the early efforts of the onetime Situationist Asger Jorn, which were just that.