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THE ART GALLERIES

Whither, Whither?

THE absurdity explosion, which in the field of what is broadly called painting has already produced the phenomenon of "pure-art" artists sedulously imitating the works of "impure" artists on the order of cartoonists, makers of comic strips, poster painters, and similar former artistic untouchables; the phenomenon of artists, at work in a field that might vaguely be called "relief" (or even three-dimensional), striving mightily to produce painted plaster replicas of blueberry pies on a plate, ice-cream cones, biscuits, and platters of pork chops, in the style of the men of the Lower Fourth Avenue Restaurant Supply Store school, who make the same items for shop windows; and—perhaps the crowning touch—the possibility (cheerily entertained by the press) that another pure artist, who turned out a composition made up entirely of cartons for Brillo, might be threatened with a lawsuit by the man who designed the cartons, himself a "pure" artist most of the time but one who apparently dabbles in impurity now and then for financial reasons . . . Well, I have got myself involved in a fairly long sentence, but the nub of the matter is that this same explosion seems now to have carried far enough to include sculpture. That is, if the new Whitney Annual—the first in a good many years, I believe, to be devoted entirely to that one branch of the arts—is to be trusted, and I think it is, for the exhibition gives every indication of both careful and catholic selection. It suggests, too, by the way, that when the explosion zeroed in on sculpture, it scattered it in just about all directions.

Sculpture used to be a fairly staid art form compared to its flightier sister, painting, and the modes it embraced were simple in classification. There were old, established terms for them—most of them, oddly, derived from painting—and they were readily understandable to even the most casually instructed amateur. One spoke of "Impressionist" sculpture (Rodin) and "Classic" (Maillol), "Abstract" (Archipenko, Arp), "Constructivist" (Gabo, Pevsner), and that, plus a very few other sorts—oh, yes, Dada, which brought in the cult of the "found" object (Duchamp)—was the whole of

it. Things are harder now. How should one classify, in the Whitney show, John Chamberlain's "Kandy Krunch," one of those monolithic assemblages of auto parts crushed up in a junk-metal baler—as Constructivist or Destructivist? Or Jason Seley's "Primavera," a columnar celebration of spring and the open road made up solely of car bumpers? Is William King's elongated standing figure called "Business Man," made of burlap carefully stitched around an armature, to be called pop art, or straight caricature in its own right?



(Incidentally—and though I don't advance this as evidence of a trend, I think it is worth noting—a number of male sculptors have turned to needle and thread in assembling their works, the most notable example being Claes Oldenburg's somehow very likable "Soft Wall Switches," which is exactly that: a huge, puffed-out, pillowy replica of a pair of light switches on a wall.) And is—to conclude the list of my dilemmas—Tauno Kauppi's "Wave" a relief or a kind of surge of potato chips? Apart from admitting to a mild amount of restlessness at the difficulties this spraying out of techniques and attitudes presents to the reviewer, I would not want to say anything that could be understood as a complaint about all these divergences. On the contrary, I think they are enjoyable, and one of the nicer things about the collection at the Whitney is that one can't help feeling that for the most part the artists involved also found their work fun. There are a hundred and twenty-three of them in all—a group that is nationwide in scope—and I have a feeling that the jury of selection enjoyed its work, too.

Of the dozen or more styles and mixtures of styles (it might be more accurate to refer to them as different ways of attacking the artistic problems involved), one of the more prominent is a three-dimensional variant or adaptation of pop art. One finds this in such pieces as Elias Friedensohn's "Pyramus and Thisbe," made principally of painted wood, in which Pyramus is talking to his lady on a pay telephone; Frank Gallo's deflated-looking nude, "Girl in Sling Chair;" and "The Car," Marisol's superb "assemblage," as she



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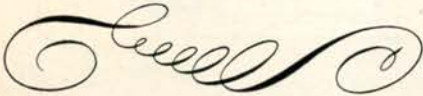
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allel to similar studies of, say, the "Expulsion from Eden" on Renaissance church doors, and Luise Kaish has contributed an "Expulsion from Eden," also a relief in bronze, whose sweeping energy parallels the turbulence of Turner in painting.

As in any showing so varied and adventurous, there are a number—fairly small, fortunately—of just plain bad pieces. For the most part, these result from an excess of some quality—a striving for intricacy of design, as in Claire Falkenstein's rather rickety wire "Chariot" and John Clague's madly complicated "Overture in Black and White," or, conversely, a tendency to oversimplify, at times heavy-handedly, as in Lyman Kipp's blunt, blocky arrangement of rectangular boxes called "Nexus," as well as in Tony Delap's "Isis," in which all Egypt is reduced to a series of nested triangles. For all that, this whole affair, too, was as much fun to explore as it has been to write about.

AT the Sidney Janis is an exhibition called "Three Generations," and though it is made up mainly of paintings, it gives a few sidelong hints on how the sculpture explosion I have spoken of came about. It is also an excellent showing in its own right. The three generations, perhaps arbitrarily delimited, are classed as the Cubist and Surrealist Generation (Arp, Braque, Picasso, Ernst, Dali, and so on), followed by the Abstract Expressionist one (de Kooning, Gorky, Motherwell, and so on) and, finally, the New Realist Generation (Dine, Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg, Warhol, and so on). The show, while fairly large (some forty pieces) and skillfully selected, does not pretend to be a definitive survey, being too disconnected for that. But as an easygoing, rather skimming one, it still gives a fair notion of the alternating waves and waverings of artistic impulses that led up from the Cubists, around 1910 (the date of Braque's "Le Jacquet," the earliest work in the collection), to the present. Along the way, there are some excellent pieces, notably a fine fairly early Gris still-life ("Coffee Mill and Bottle"), an interesting "brick-wall" study by Mondrian (also fairly early), a handsome de Chirico, "La Magie de la Nuit," and—to move more rapidly in time—a bland Ernst "Sun and Sea," a neat Magritte ("Unexpected Reply"), a big, dashing Franz Kline ("Diamond"), a relatively sedate Rauschenberg compilation called "Crocus," and a Segal grouping of life-



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size plaster figures, titled "Rock and Roll Combo." And if the show doesn't explain anything, it certainly gives a person to think—especially if one relates it to the Whitney—about such matters as the ever-widening influence of Gorky (represented here by a beautifully fluent untitled oil, diagonal in design), the permanence of Arp ("Torse Chorée," in marble), and, to keep things in perspective, the violent zig-zags between the Abstract Expressionists (Romantics, as we see them now) and the so far slightly raucous Third Generation, with its frequent tendency to use a sledgehammer to drive home the point, even if it is only a tack to begin with. I am thinking now of Wesselmann's "Interior No. 3," with a refrigerator, some 7-Up bottles, a clock, and a radio (a working one, too, and I'm getting tired of that device), of Warhol's four-part *Photoplay*-style portrait, "Liz" (Taylor, of course), and of a "Double Isometric Self Portrait," by Dine, of a couple of stylized bathrobes, which isn't isometric at all, or else my high-school course in mechanical drafting led me far astray. Come to think of it, in "Combo," the Segal presentation, the group—aside from the girl singer—consists of only two players, which is, technically, a duo, and the instruments (bass drum and traps and guitar) are real. This is hardly fair, for it mixes real reality with a simulated one. What are we coming to, anyway? —ROBERT M. COATES

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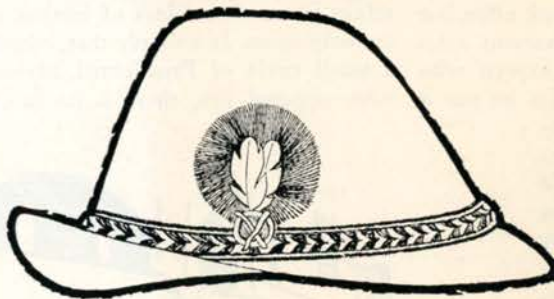
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