artweek

■ The New Exhibition ■ H. C. Westermann ■ Pat Warner ■ Michihiro Kosuge

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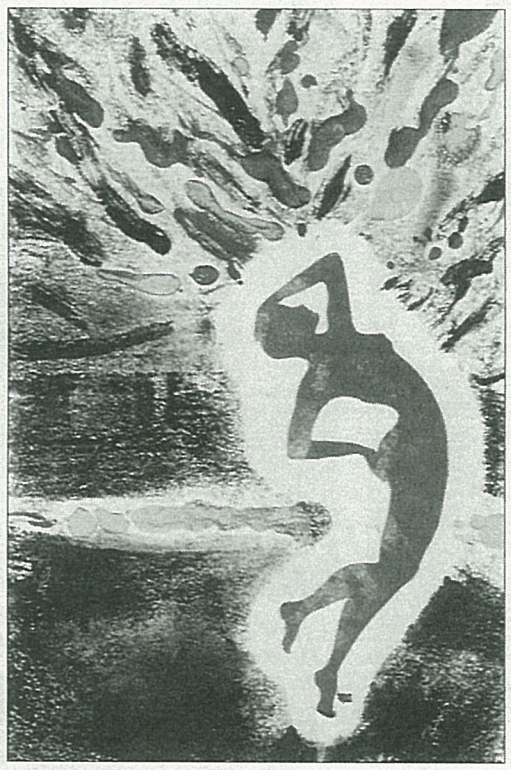
COMING ATTRACTIONS

Time. One of the great mysteries of life—we live in it, but can't touch it or change it. What do contemporary artists make of it? Coming in the December issue of *Artweek*.



Kay Carlson, *Woman in Red,* 1997, monoprint 15" x 11", in the Industrial Center Building's Holiday Open Studios, in Sausalito. page 2

Cover: Annabeth Rosen, detail of *Stripe Vine Tile,* 1996, cermaic, 18" x 20" x 6-1/2", at the Richard L. Nelson Gallery, UC Davis. page 6

Peripheral Vision

Meredith Tromble

Can the role of a "hero" be rescued? A couple of summers ago, in a fit of adventurous nostalgia, I nominated *Tarzan of the Apes* by Edgar Rice Burroughs as a selection for my reading group. A classic, I argued, if only of light literature. And a continuing presence in the culture; sure to be enlightening in some way, if only as an example of the fantasies that work strongly on our collective imagination. Yes, as the group asked, I had read it before recommending it—when I was eight years old. A week later I sat transfixed, plowing through one of the more racist tales I have ever had the embarrassment to read and contemplating a prolonged grovel of apology to the group.

My eight-year-old self thrilled to the story of the man with a powerful physique, character and intelligence—the human equivalent of a deluxe Swiss army knife with a blade to meet every challenge. My eight-year-old self didn't particularly notice that this paragon shone so very brightly because he was presented against a backdrop of "dirty dark savages" and "fainting maidens."

Just as my eighteen-year-old self didn't particularly notice that the art hero Jackson Pollock was "original," "spontaneous" and "universal" as opposed to the "primitive" Native American artists from whom he drew inspiration or "faint-hearted" artists who worked representationally. I just wanted to live the tale, to grow into a hero whose work would have power and punch and bring the public to its knees. An artist whose true qualities would be reflected in an "original" style which would bring her the adoration and respect of others. You'll notice that "her." As I eventually did. The trajectory of enlightenment, activism and empowerment which then opened before me is a path which has been described by many others.

When I, in my turn, became a teacher, women and people of color had starring roles in my survey of Contemporary Art History. But the opening lectures, a discussion of Abstract Expressionism meant to provide a springboard for everything that followed, were always a problem. Yes, I had a few slides of Elaine de Kooning's and Lee Krasner's work, a Joan Mitchell, a Grace Hartigan. But their story, as I understood it, boiled down to "they were there, but never had a chance."

I could tell the story of the artists' club at the Cedar Bar, how painters Ruth Abrams, Milton Resnick and Philip Pavia discussed forming a club but when it actually met, Abrams was shut out. No women allowed. But uneasily, I noticed that Krasner's work seemed less "spontaneous," Mitchell's less "original," and Hartigan's less "universal" than the work of the more famous men.

Then I read Anne Eden Gibson's new book *Abstract Expressionism Other Politics*. I don't suppose it would be a page turner for most people, but I could hardly put it down. Stray contradictions which had been fuzzing the edges of my picture of Abstract Expressionism suddenly resolved into a new understanding. The problems were not in the art, but in the ideas, which turned out to have been selectively applied.

Was the work of the Abstract Expressionists spontaneous? Gibson points out that the pressure to exhibit certain marks of "spontaneity"—visible brush strokes, drips—was intense. Barnett Newman's first show was coldly received by his peers because it didn't conform to this ideal of "spontaneity"—which surely, enforced as a rule, lost any integrity it might have had.

Was the work of the Abstract Expressionists "original"? Gibson delineates beautifully the "closed circle" character of the thinking at work. Critic Clement Greenberg applauded Gorky for building on and returning Surrealist Roberto Matta's style to "serious" painting in an "original" way. But if Lee Krasner's work departed from Pollock's, it was not "original" but "derivative."

Was the work of the Abstract Expressionists "universal"? According to Gibson, both Adolph Gottlieb and Hale Woodruff pursued the forms and meanings of African art and repeated them in their paintings. But Woodruff's interest reinforced his African-American heritage. Only Gottlieb, claiming a heritage different from his own, was seen as making "universal" art.

Gibson sums it up: "The social roles afforded to African Americans, women of all colors, gay men and lesbians in the United States in the 1940s hardly prepared them for the heroic attitudes that were required for participation in the Abstract Expressionist milieu. In fact, the kinds of "difference" that women, gays, and people of color were thought to embody generally precluded them from heroic artistic roles in the eyes of the dominant culture."

All true. The stories she relates have a certain grim humor, as when a misty, pink painting by Theodoros Stamos is interpreted as part of a brave, heroic search to incorporate the feminine; while a misty, pink painting by Anne Ryan is "weak" and "minor." For all Abstract Expressionism's reputed emphasis on the "art object," a sneaky, unconscious consideration of the "art maker" seems to have predetermined critical response.

At this point in the argument, one is enlightened but discouraged. The evidence of prejudice decorated and elaborated and beautified by gasbaggery makes the heroic quest look like a trip to dump the garbage—on some poor passer-by's head. But Gibson doesn't stop there. She proposes a different way of looking at the matter, "... the accommodations and resistances ... disempowered artists made to reigning avant-garde assumptions may have formed the basis for other kinds of heroism that make their work as rewarding and inspiring now as that of their better-known colleagues."

One of the many examples she gives is Woodruff's diverse oeuvre. "Woodruff believed that representation and abstraction were equally useful ... The facility with which Woodruff moved among the different forms of representation must have appeared to many whites—especially members of the Club—as a lack of sincerity or conviction, and therefore as a weakness. But as an African American, Woodruff would have been accustomed to the fact that how he felt and how he was perceived were seldom the same." In retrospect, Woodruff's embrace of stylistic complexity seems as sincere, individual and "heroic" as Pollock's embrace of stylistic consistency.

After I rip up my old syllabus for Contemporary Art History, I'll replace it with a version that includes Woodruff, Rose Piper, Steve Wheeler, and other discoveries from Gibson's book. Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko will be there—they'll just have more company. As Gibson says, "Perhaps now, in an era when more divergent cultures, identities, classes and sexualities are demanding equal consideration, it may become apparent that even though it has been a slow burn, there were several ways to win and more winners in the game called Abstract Expressionism."

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