Visionary Images

The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago

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Jon Borofsky

Gary Bower

Winifred Gallagher

Bryan Hunt

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Robert Moskowitz

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Julian Schnabel

Martin Silverman

Donald Sultan

Jeff Way

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May 6-June 16, 1979

VISIONARY IMAGES: Emblematic Figuration

Carter Ratcliff

It should be noted immediately that "emblematic figuration" is not the name of a new art movement. The artists in this exhibition need—and deserve—to be seen as individuals.

The phrase "emblematic figuration" could as well be "schematic figuration," for the one thing the disparate artists here have in common is that they refer to objects without making much use of the representational devices that developed from Italian High Renaissance rationalities. That is, they do not rely heavily on perspective, tonal modeling, proportional rhythms or compositional harmonies. Instead the artists schematize their images, following hints from commercial graphics, cartooning, non-Western art, the art of the untutored, the immature, perhaps the insane. The results are emblems, icons, and fetishes of a sophisticated, self-conscious sort.

Now, it may seem that most adventurous art of the 20th century has left behind the heritage of the Renaissance, but I think the opposite is the case. Cubism, for example, uses all the standard devices of traditional realism and, what is more, uses them to refer directly to things in the world—tables, chairs, violins, people. The reason a Braque or a Picasso from 1911 does not look like a Raphael or a Courbet is that the Cubists induced their representational devices to have a second referent: the devices themselves. So, for example, tonal modeling in Analytic Cubism (1909-14) had a double function: it suggested volume *and*, thanks to pressures exerted by distortion and ellipsis, it commented on itself by asserting the flatness of the surface where it appears. Cubist uses of perspective led into imaginary depths and, at the same time, caught the imagination up short by insisting on the artificiality of perspective's two-dimensional patterns. Cubism made tonal modeling and perspective conscious of themselves, and did the same for all the representational devices inherited from the Renaissance.

The style of Cubism is thus a powerful reaffirmation—not a denial—of mainstream tradition; as, in different ways, are Impressionism, Fauvism, Surrealism and most post-war American art, including the art of the Chicago Imagist School, about which I will have more to say later on. For now I would like to suggest that of all the well-known modernist developments only Dada shows anything that might be called emblematic figuration.

Like the artists in this show, many of the Dadas rejected standard representational devices along with modernism's ways of rendering them self-conscious: for example, Francis Picabia's art after he left behind his early, bland Impressionist style and the mocking Cubism of his "Udnie" period. Marcel Duchamp, though not a full-fledged member of the movement, offered an important example to many who were. For present purposes it is important to note that he did not arrive at emblematic figuration until he broke with the derivative, "Cubizing" style of his *Nude Descending a Staircase*. His readymades can be thought of as found emblems, the casts and logo-like images as invented ones. Emblematic figuration shows in the work of Man Ray, Morton L. Schamberg, Marcel Janco, the early Jean Arp and many others, but this does not establish a connection between the Dadas, who formed an art movement, and these contemporary emblem makers, who do not. Indeed, the reason for mentioning the Dadas is to point out a contrast in motive that helps bring this contemporary art into focus.

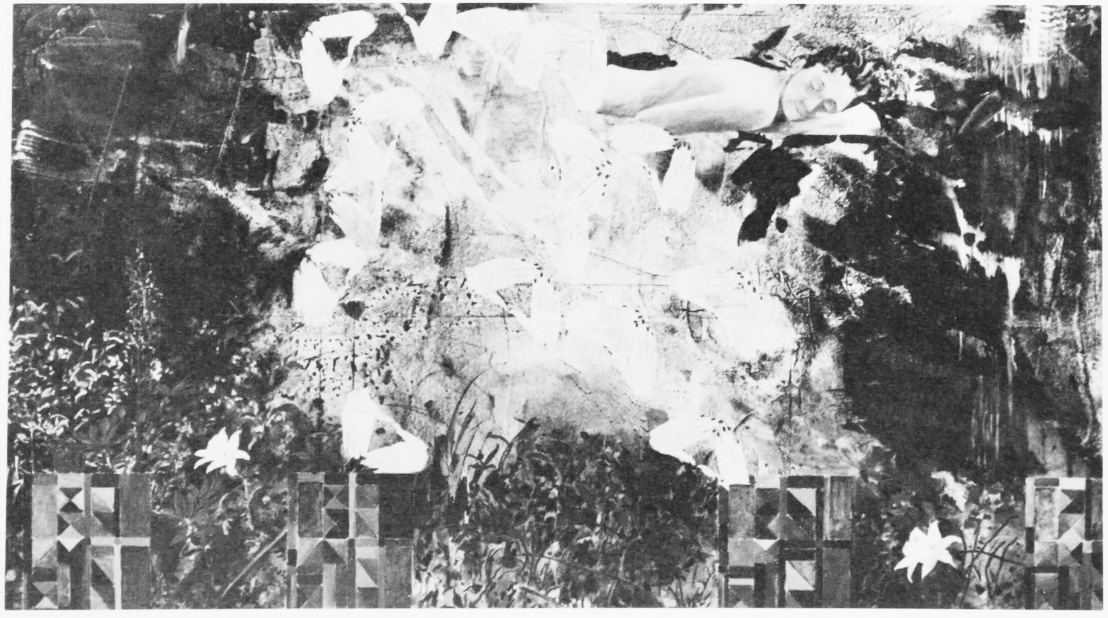
The Dadas were angry at Western civilization or, at least, contemptuous of it. (Duchamp's ironic serenity is, at base, what keeps him outside the Dada category.) The Dadas symbolized their anger and contempt with violent rejections and degradations of high-art values and devices. There was a public, mockingly political charge to their work. The artists in this show reject tradition in order to go in another direction—perhaps the opposite one. Contemporary emblematic figuration leads the artist to a realm far removed from the theatrical gestures of Dada and equally distant from those mainstream traditions against which the Dadas agitated. At present, emblematic figuration leads to visionary meanings. Its images have an entranced, levitated quality which suggests origins in private

modes of meditative or contemplative consciousness. Nothing could be less theatrical, less Dada-like, or less congenial to the social intentions of the Western mainstream from the time of the Renaissance to the recent past, with its heavily-analyzed, vigorously-promoted art movements.

The use of art to elaborate private modes of consciousness is precisely what keeps the artists in this show from forming a coherent art movement. Their common characteristic, then, is what keeps them apart. To go from the imagery of Gary Bower to that of Robert Moskowitz is to make an immense leap. Like Moskowitz, Susan Rothenberg and Donald Sultan employ reductive devices reminiscent of Minimalism, yet all three make individual use of that heritage. Reductivism itself is different for each of them, and different again for Julian Schnabel. Likewise, Bower's crowded pictorial field defines the surface of the canvas in one way, Jeff Way's field does so in another and Jon Borofsky's in yet another. Emblematic figuration in contemporary art celebrates difference, even isolation in difference. I feel obliged to insist on this because the Whitney Museum's recent "New Image" show, which included some of the artists here,[1] suggested that the opposite is the case—and surely, one supposes, the Whitney would not put on an exhibit of that sort if it had not discovered a new art movement. Well, yes, it would. Institutions benefit the most from the convenience of art movements, so their personnel are always on the lookout for them. What is looked for is usually seen, whether it exists or not.

The Whitney's "New Image" show concentrated on the development of emblematic figuration out of Minimalism and process art. Such geneologies do exist, as in the work of Moskowitz, Rothenberg, Sultan and Schnabel. But the richness of current emblematic figuration is done a great disservice if it is presented as yet another art movement deriving in a uniform way from earlier ones. It is not just that radically different notions of Minimalism and process art lie behind some of the imagery in this show. In addition, much of it follows from entirely

1. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art. "New Image Painting." December 5, 1978—January 28, 1979. Catalogue essay "New Image Painting" by Richard Marshall. Included in the exhibition were: Nicholas Africano, Jennifer Bartlett, Denise Green, Michael Hurson, Neil Jenney, Lois Lane, Robert Moskowitz, Susan Rothenberg, David True, and Joe Zucker.



Gary Bower, *Broken Spell Number 3*, 1978-79
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 60" x 120"

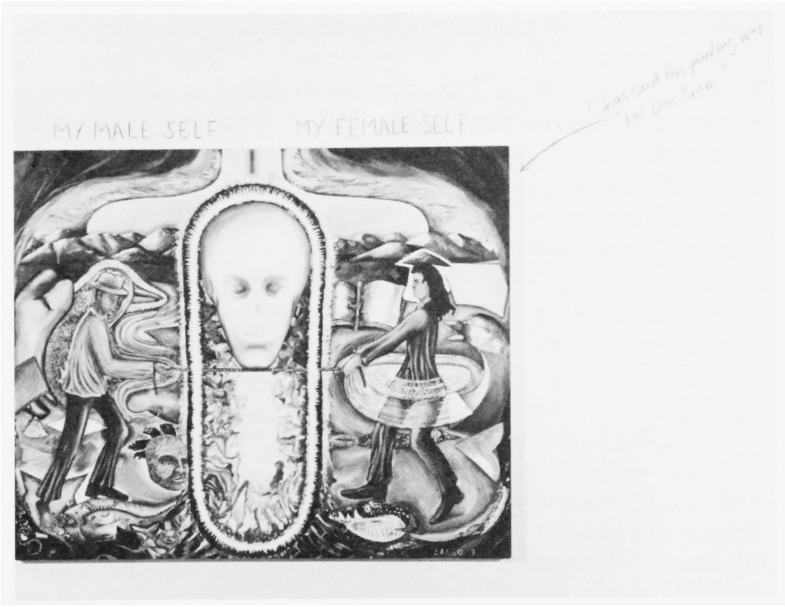
different reductionisms—for example, the stained-in color-field painting that Jeff Way did until the early 1970s. Michael Hurson has done balsawood sculpture that is minimal in its monochrome and its formal clarity but "photo-realist" in the sharp focus of its reference to furniture. Other heritages are not reductive. Gary Bower was linked for a time with Lyrical Abstraction, a late-'60s reprise of action painting. Winifred Gallagher found her way to emblematic figuration from pattern painting with a Pop-Art flavor.

Two attitudes toward history provide the poles around which the artists in this show gravitate. At one pole, art history is rejected. At the other, it is so modified that its shared, social aspects turn idiosyncratic. At both extremes and in between, contemporary emblematic figuration asserts the individual's independence. Jeff Way rejected color-field painting for visionary notations in a mode he calls the "apocalyptic pastoral." This exemplifies the complete break with art history. Robert Moskowitz' willingness to let enigmatic emblems appear against his minimalist field, thus giving the generalized reductiveness of the fields an utterly private charge of meaning, exemplifies another attitude—one that transforms the shared "logic" of history into the starting point for visionary images far beyond the reach of any logic.

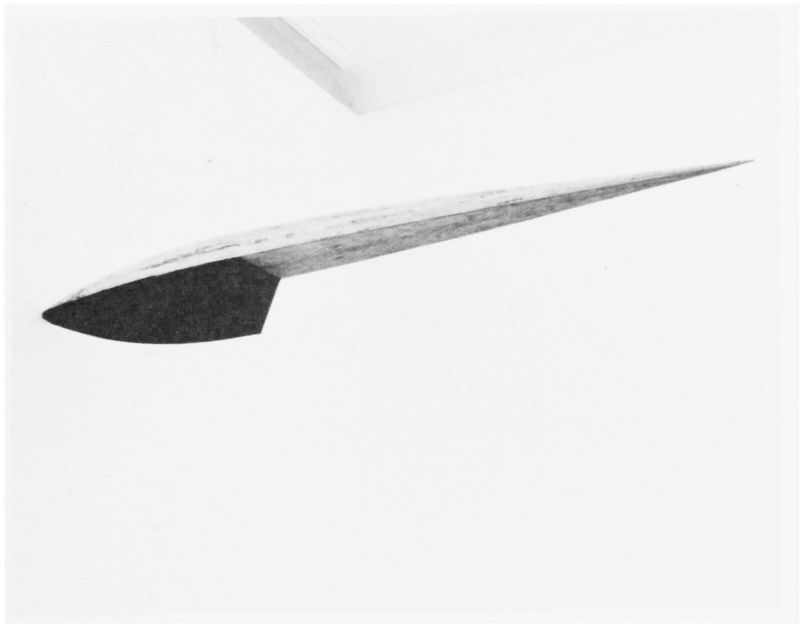
I would like to suggest the way the other artists in this show are positioned in the region marked out by Way and Moskowitz, but first I think I should say something about the Chicago Imagist School. As eccentric, elusive figuration began to appear in the wake of New York styles defined in the 1960s, observers began, quite rightly, to note that something similar has long been visible in the work of Chicago artists. Some commentators have even suggested that no distinction need be made between the artists in this show and artists grouped under the labels Chicago Monster Roster, Hairy Who, The False Image, and so on. I think this is wrong.

The strangeness, the idiosyncracy of Chicago art is a shared quality, which is to say that there exists a Chicago School of art—not a single art movement, but something more encompassing and deeper. It is a varied, coherent development out of two European art movements, Surrealism (both "photographic" and biomorphic) and Expressionism. In the post-war years, the Chicago School has evolved through several generations to full independence. So Chicago art is not merely an

Jeff Way, *Landscape*, 1977
Oil on canvas, 72" x 192"



Jon Borofsky, *My Male Self, My Female Self at 2,468,007*, 1977-79
Oil on canvas, charcoal on wall, 63" x 78 1/2"



Bryan Hunt, *MIE*, 1979
Mixed media, 65" long x 11" diameter

offshoot of two European styles, but a self-sufficient cluster of original developments, all of them reflecting shared values, meanings and traditions.

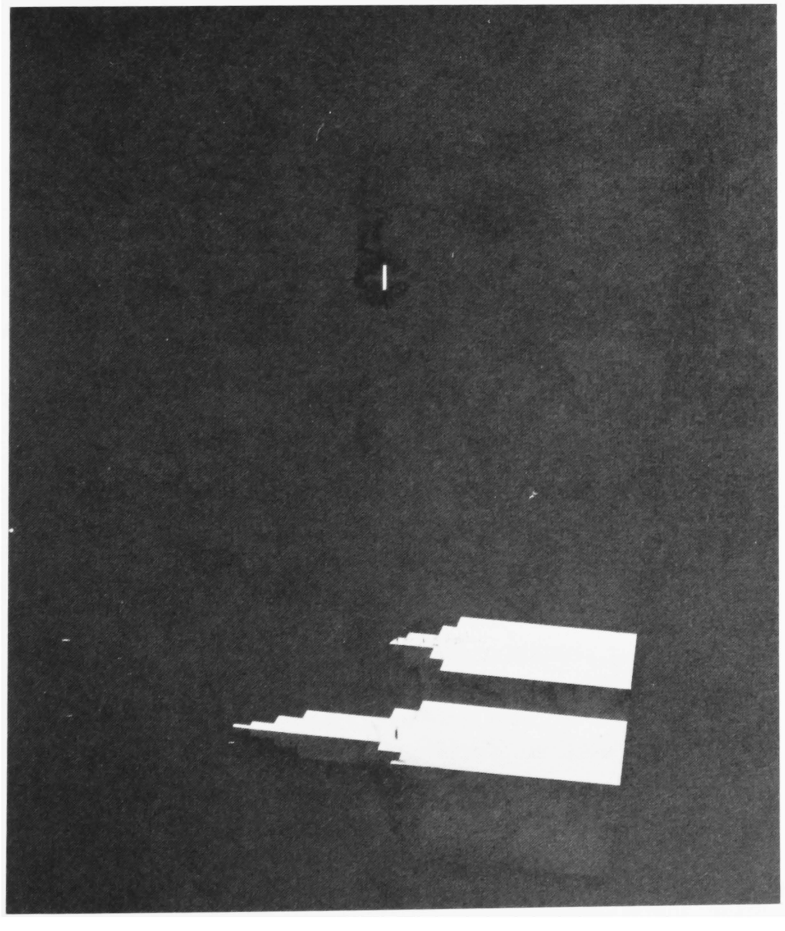
While the deliberate weirdness of some Chicago figuration may give it a resemblance to some of the imagery in this show, that is quite superficial. First of all, the disparaties of, say, Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson and Roger Brown are played out within the boundaries of a shared history. It is the richness of this history that gives Chicago art the resources it needs to cohere as a school, which it does. One reads its meanings in light of that coherence, whereas one reads the meanings of the emblematic figuration in this show in light of its rejection of schools, movements and, in some cases, history. This leads to another point. The art of the Chicago School makes a collective leap into realms hinted at but left unexplored by Surrealism and Expressionism. Thus it subjects the heritage of Western representational devices to extremes of evolutionary pressure. As a result, its images are strange but still employ the means of high art in some form. Perspective, tonal modeling, compositional harmony—Chicago art has the full range of them, as highly evolved and self-conscious as they are in Cubism, Expressionism and all the mainstream styles of modernist figuration. So, odd as Chicagoans' representational usages sometimes are, they prevent Chicago art from being rightly called emblematic figuration.

Now, some of the artists in this show are from the Midwest—Gary Bower, for example, and Jeff Way. Michael Hurson has lived and worked in Chicago. Yet all the artists here, including these three and the Californian, Jon Borofsky, have developed out of the New York School. When they repudiate history, it is New York history they repudiate. When they modify history, New York provides them with their "material." So to say that they have something in common, something which makes them all emblematic-figurative artists, is to say in part that all of them have entered into the stylistic melee of the New York School in the '70s—that shared incoherence—and found a way of transcending it in the direction of private meanings signified by schematic, non-realist references to things in the world.

As I suggested, Robert Moskowitz, with his reinvention of the minimalist field, stands opposite to Jeff Way, with his often frenzied visionary notations—his "apocalyptic pastoral." One way of getting at what they share, each in his isolation, is to note that they both release figurative images from a concern

basic to our representational traditions. That concern is gravity. The means for depicting it, for depicting the weight and substance of objects, is essential to the rationalist mainstream that is sustained even by the seeming irrationalities of so much modernist art. Gravitational coherence is as important to the traditions of Western art as the look of unified light and space. Both Way and Moskowitz let their images float free.

When this happens in Magritte, for example, one is to imagine that some strange counter-gravitational force is at work. Ordinary reality has been inflected in a profound manner—inflected but not fundamentally altered. For contemporary emblematic figuration, "reality" begins with levitated images.

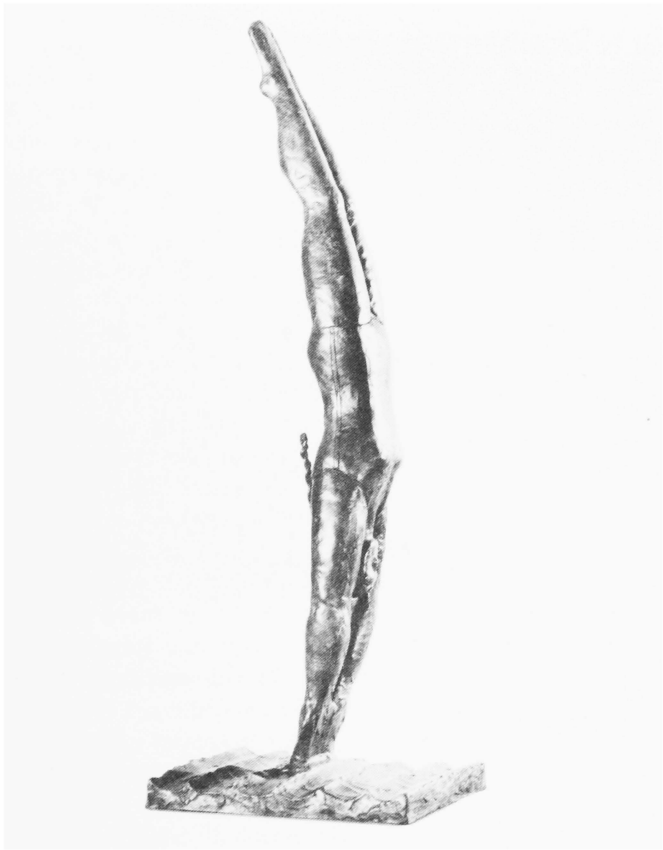


Robert Moskowitz, *Wrigley Building*, 1975
Acrylic and latex on canvas, 90" x 75"

Hence it is necessary to see those images not as highly personal references to the world (as in, say, Surrealism and the Chicago School) but as references to inner realms where images are born. These realms are states of consciousness where gravity is neither accepted nor rejected, where it need not be acknowledged in any manner whatsoever. These are dream states, states of contemplation, meditation and visionary experience. Jon Borofsky employs a rough notational manner to make it clear that his intentions have little to do with the high styles of mainstream art. His floating, drifting, highly-colored images arrive directly from his dreams. The rich drift of imagery across the surfaces of Gary Bower's canvases looks responsibly realist at first glance. Then, as one is drawn to the entranced quality of his paint textures, one senses that he does not refer to ordinary things in ordinary space, lit by ordinary light. Rather, the artist is referring to his *experience* of certain aspects of the world—"bodies of knowledge," as he calls them—which he makes the focus of intense contemplative energy. Birds, tatooing, measurement-by-hand: these and more are the subjects of his "knowledge," which is a form of insight he enacts by doing his paintings. The viewer responds by turning the act of seeing into a comparably personal act of insight.

Bryan Hunt's light, translucent dirigible shapes come close to a literal levitation. His bronzes of water (whether flowing, the "Waterfalls," or just rippled, the "Lakes") image forth a floating state which can be seen as a symbol of consciousness detached from the world by its self-awareness. A bronze representing a body of water standing by itself evokes the integrity of thought and its emotional tone more convincingly than it refers to the facts of landscape. Hunt's "Lakes" are those of conceptualized vision, not of the world. It may or may not be interesting to know that both kinds of floating imagery, the "blimps" and the water-forms, have a biographical flavor. Hunt worked for a time as an engineer's aide in the aerospace industry; and his first bronze "Lake" refers to a place where he spent his summers as a child. But it would not help much to know which lake in Indiana inspired the original "Lake," nor to get a detailed account of Borofsky's dreams or Bower's "bodies of knowledge." The point is in the image offered to the viewer. Rather, the challenge is there: the eye or the imagination must somehow levitate in sympathy.

Martin Silverman's bronze figures combine weightiness and gracefulness. This focuses their poses. The diver suspended just above the water, the sweeper balanced in the middle of his

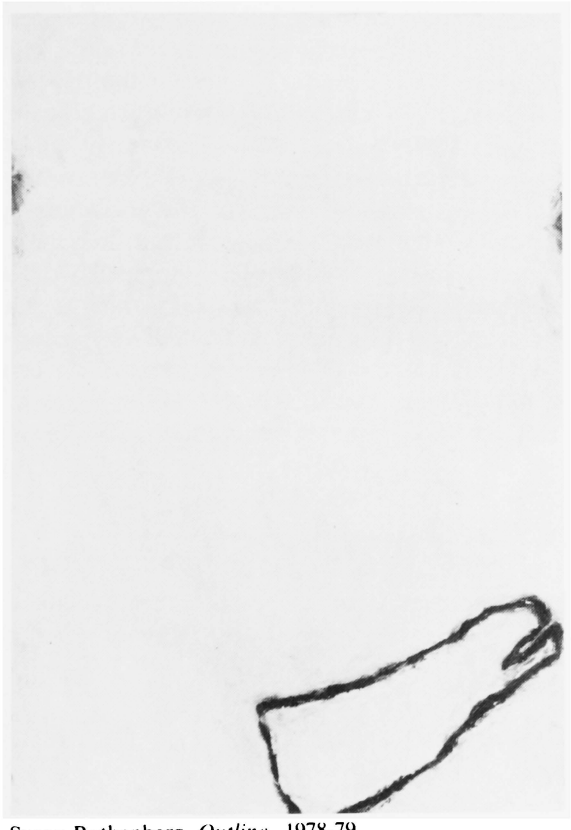


Martin Silverman, *Georgia*, 1978
Bronze, edition of 4, 32" high

action, the hunter with a bird floating over his head—these figures all seem to have suspended time by means of self-absorption. Though clearly made of bronze, they are more fully present as images—emblems—than as physical weights; and the isolated character of their presences blocks any implications of narrative, of ordinary biography. Silverman's art was close for a time to that of Joel Shapiro, a somewhat older sculptor who has been working throughout the '70s at the border where abstract, minimalist form takes on figurative qualities. Cubes suggest houses, and so on. The small size of Shapiro's forms enhances this ambiguity, and leads to ambiguities of scale. Some of his forms seem monumental, just as the stockiness of Silverman's small figures makes them look gigantic—so turned in on themselves that their sense of self gathers in all of reality. But that is an animistic reading. More literally, Silverman's figures are emblems of a detached, almost solipsistic consciousness in the artist and in the viewer who responds with sympathy.

Joel Shapiro's work is important to nearly every artist who has arrived at emblematic figuration from Minimalism or process art. The exception is Robert Moskowitz, a veteran of the '60s whose painting is as important a source as Shapiro's sculpture. Pat Stier's flirtations with recognizable images have had an effect, as have Dennis Oppenheim's dolls and puppets from the early '70s. Jim Dine and Philip Guston are important for showing that readymade, commercial styles and images can be rescued from the public meanings which gave Pop Art its ironic foundation. However, all of these artists—with the exception of Moskowitz—have stayed in the mainstream. Shapiro is an idiosyncratic late Minimalist. Guston is, despite his bizarre cartooning, still a member of the painterly wing of the New York School. They have not made the breaks with tradition that might turn them into visionaries of the emblematic-figurative kind on view here. I suppose Guston's recent painting would inspire the most argument on this point. Has he retreated to a private realm? I do not think so. It seems to me that his eccentricities are directed with desperation, even bitterness, toward the mainstream of Western art and of course toward its general audience. Guston courts gravity. He shows no interest in visionary levitation.

Nonetheless, the techniques (not the intentions) of Guston, Jasper Johns and perhaps Brice Marden are important to Susan Rothenberg and Julian Schnabel, who allow recognizable images to drift up out of the heavily-worked textures of their paintings' surfaces. Neither artist permits clear interpretations. One senses that Rothenberg's horses, hands, skulls and bones are intended to convey the emotional flavor of her process. Perhaps one could go so far as to say that the painterly evidence of her process, so flavored, is an emblem of some state or quality of being. But there seems as little need to analyze and define the emblem's workings as there is to devise a key to Borofsky's dreams. There may be such a key. Rothenberg's meanings may, somewhere, be clear. For the viewer, that is not as important as the elusive openings onto one's own visionary states offered by these artists. An adequate response requires one to achieve a degree of isolation comparable to that from which these artworks arrive. Having broken or weakened their links to the shared meanings of modernist history, these artists do not offer art-as-communication or art-as-reinforce-

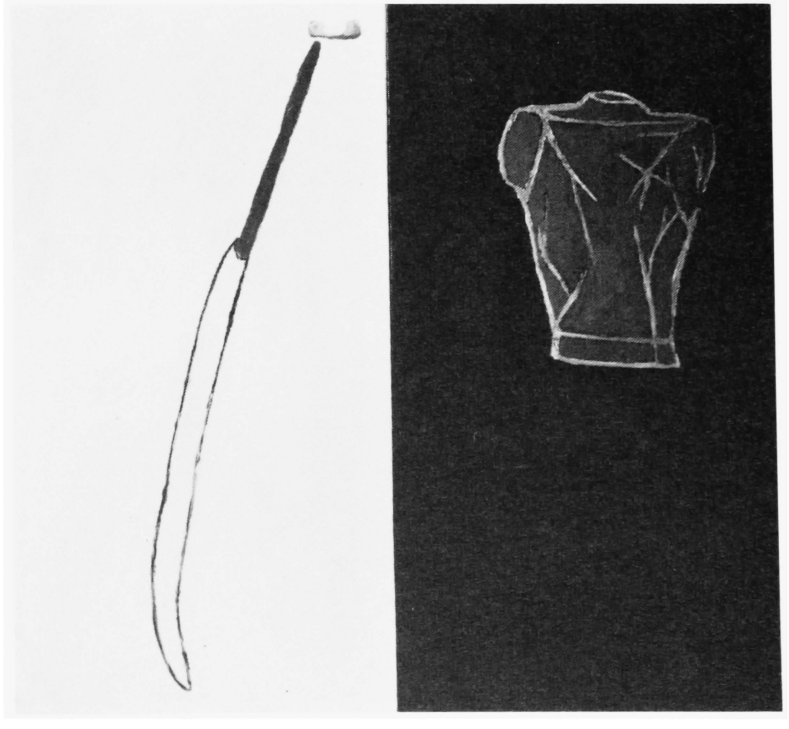


Susan Rothenberg, *Outline*, 1978-79
Acrylic and flashe on canvas, 73" x 50"

ment-of-social values. (Remember, for example, that Cubism celebrates the widely-shared 20th century ideal of ironically fragmented individuality.) What these artists offer is art-as–approach–to-the-visionary-self. The images in their work are offered as occasions for consciousness to drift beyond all imagery to an intensified awareness of its own particular qualities. That is why their images are emblematic: to avoid the representational devices that bind mainstream art to the shared meanings of the social world we hold in common.

The textures of Julian Schnabel's paintings generate from their quietude harsh, even militaristic forms. Their emotional flavor, though difficult to pin down, is tense with obsession. It is as though he lets the painterly monochrome of Marden, Ryman and others reveal what its blankness hides. He begins, then, with "painterly minimalism" and, with some cues from Guston, opens the surface to pressures of an elusive but relentless sort. Donald Sultan begins with a device drawn from Minimalism's linear repertoire—the grid, which he finds readymade in linoleum flooring. Rather than hold it flat, he lets it curl. Rather than keep it on the floor, where linoleum is usually seen, he lets it drift up to the wall, where pictorial readings are inevitable. "Flaws" read as islands on the horizon indicated as, for example, where green tiles (the ocean) meet blue ones (the sky). Colored white, these inflections of the grid read as sails or icebergs or, in the form of a long scratch, as lightning. The frame's heaviness is overcome by these emblematic images. Meaning shifts to that interior realm where everything is weightless, afloat, held in place by contemplative energies.

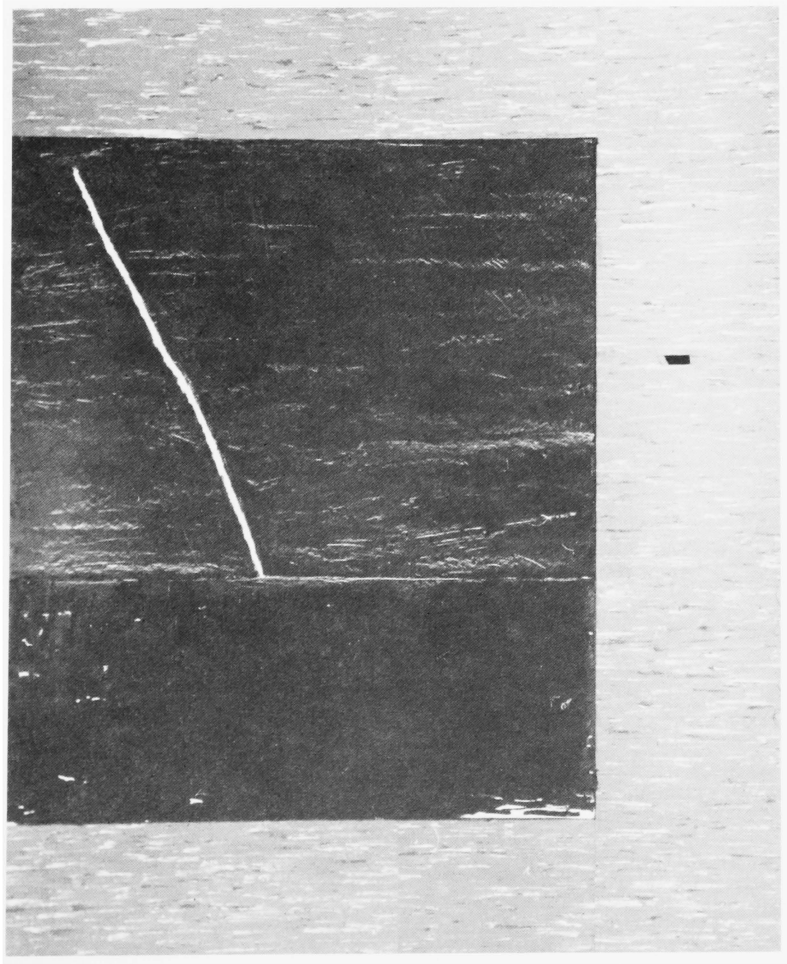
Looking at emblematic figuration, one generates meaning out of the quality of the eye's experience. (In mainstream art, the eye acknowledges meaning conveyed by some variant of established conventions.) Sometimes, as with Sultan's landscape emblems, the eye watches images themselves insinuating themselves in ordinary textures, much as faces and figures are seen



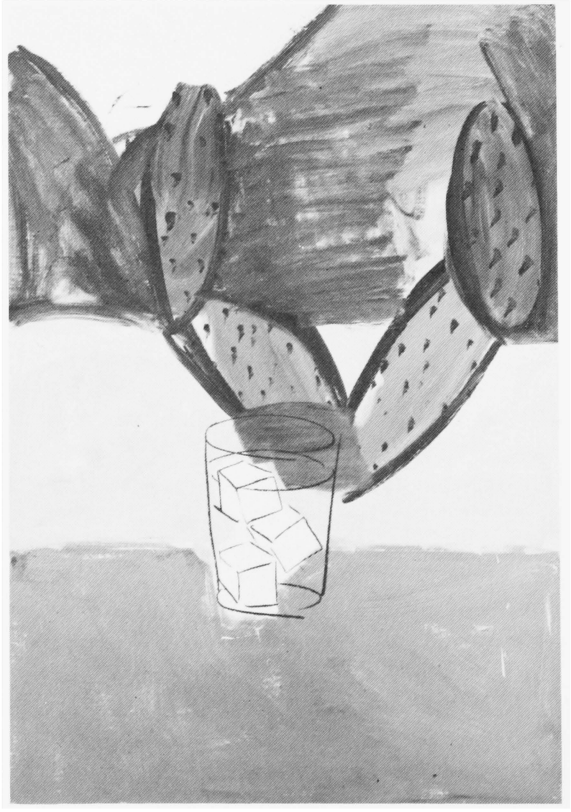
Julian Schnabel, *Vallansasca, Italian Hero*, 1978-79
Oil on canvas, 96" x 96"

in outcroppings of rock and clouds. Here it seems that one's visionary faculties have been projected, in a punning mood, into the world. Something similar, but more astringent and more oblique, happens in those paintings by Michael Hurson where patches of color and schematic, cartoon-like shapes appear to be drawn into one another's vicinity by inherent formal affinities. Hurson paints *as if* formal qualities were autonomous energies capable of levitating into place in order to become an artwork. This visionary fiction mocks the social intentions and pretensions of New York formalism.

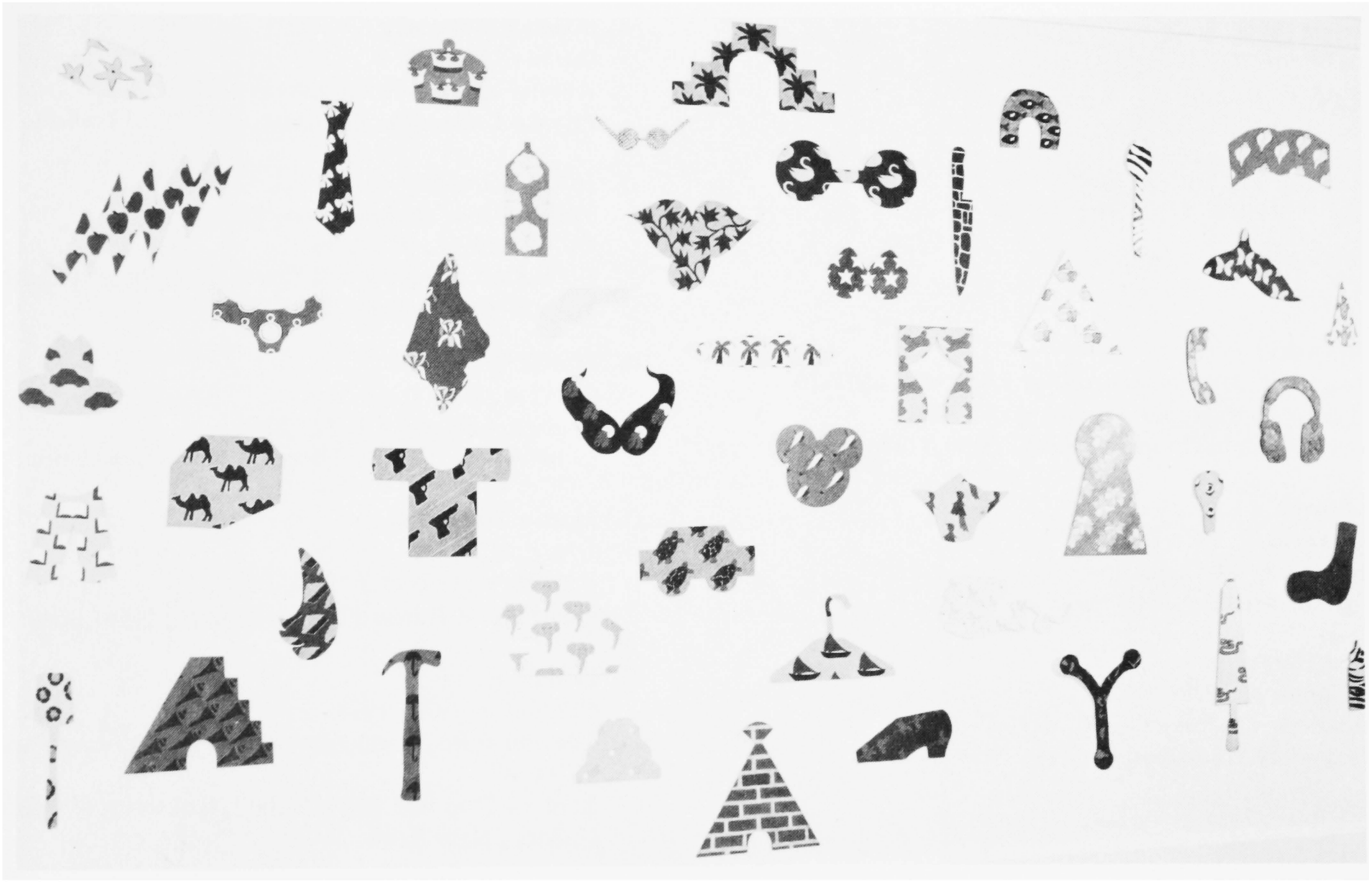
All sense of place in Hurson's paintings is a matter of layered planes. Even "portraits" are put together like architectural images. As they drift, these planes never quite click into place, though some place or another is always figured forth by his schematic drawing—poolside, the desert, a desk against a wall. These settings stay unrealized, not inhabited by ghosts so much as ghostly themselves, because the compelling "places" to which the imagination is drawn are elsewhere, in the pictorial realm envisioned with such deliberate uncertainty by the drift of Hurson's formal devices. The sparseness of his imagery recalls minimalist reductionism while mocking it with figuration. There are echoes as well of field painting, gestural and other. Pop Art too is acknowledged, sardonically. As Hurson's pictorial elements float, entranced, the entire history of post-war New York art appears to be reinvented in an inward mode.



Donald Sultan, *October 6, 1978*, 1978
Tile, oil paint, spackling compound, masonite and wood, 60" x 49"



Michael Hurson, *Ice Cube Painting*, 1972
Oil, silkscreen on canvas, 44" x 30"



Winifred Gallagher, *Constellation I*, 1978-79
Oil on wood, 47 elements, 96" x 168" overall

Winifred Gallagher is far more cheerful, though no less inward. She lets painted Pop-style images drift in allover patterns until they intersect with cut-out images of a similar kind. These motions take place in the imagination, first the artist's and then the viewer's. The results show in contrasts: a zigzag of lightning with an apple pattern; a coat hanger-shape covered with sailboats; a starfish-covered hat, and so on. Colors are bright, form is simple. Beneath this deliberate courting of a nursery style is a sharp, aggressive wit and beneath that is the possibility of entry into a private realm where the contents of Gallagher's domestic world levitate, floating out of decorativeness into charged, mysterious contact.

It is a long way from Gallagher's bright colors to Rothenberg's bleached and sooty ones. It is a long way from Rothenberg's exquisite late-Johnsian textures to Way's frenzied, slapdash vistas. Sometimes it seems impossible to see any connection between the latter's "apocalyptic pastoral" and Hurson's ironic urbanity. What do Bower's "bodies of knowledge" have to do with Hunt's bodies of water? Nothing, in the ordinary way of looking at art. No shared style, no unified historical development, can be seen here. That is just the point. At present, American art has produced a centrifugal tendency, emblematic figuration, which launches some artists into isolation. Rather, it launches their imagery into a realm where levitation—antigravity—signifies that the weight of mainstream tradition has been shed and meaning has achieved an inward, visionary mode.

Catalogue

1. Jon Borofsky
My Male Self, My Female Self at 2,468,007, 1977-79
Oil on canvas, charcoal on wall, 63″ x 78½″
Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

2. Gary Bower
Broken Spell II, 1974-78
Oil on canvas, 44″ x 38″
Lent by the artist

3. Winifred Gallagher
Constellation I, 1978-79
Oil on wood, 47 elements, 96″ x 168″ overall
Courtesy of Harold Reed Gallery, New York

4. Bryan Hunt
Bear Run I, 1978
Bronze, 114″ x 16″ x 5″
Courtesy of Blum Helman Gallery, New York

5. Bryan Hunt
MIE I, 1979
Mixed media, 41″ long x 7″ diameter
Courtesy of Blum Helman Gallery, New York

6. Michael Hurson
Ice Cube Painting, 1972
Oil, silkscreen on canvas, 44″ x 30″
Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

7. Robert Moskowitz
Stack No. 1, 1979
Oil, latex and acrylic on canvas, 108″ x 34½″
Lent by the artist

8. Susan Rothenberg
Outline, 1978-79
Acrylic and flashe on canvas, 73″ x 50″
Private Collection, Courtesy of Willard Gallery, New York

9. Julian Schnabel
Vallansasca, Italian Hero, 1978-79
Oil on canvas, 96″ x 96″
Collection of Harry and Linda Macklowe, Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York

10. Martin Silverman
Georgia, 1978
Bronze, edition of 4, 32″ high
Courtesy of Edward Thorp Gallery, New York

11. Martin Silverman
5:15 P.M., 1977
Bronze, edition of 3, 14¾″ high
Courtesy of Edward Thorp Gallery, New York

12. Donald Sultan
October 6, 1978, 1978
Tile, oil paint, spackling compound, masonite and wood, 60″ x 49″
Lent by Don and Mera Rubell, Courtesy of Willard Gallery, New York

13. Jeff Way
Landscape, 1977
Oil on canvas, 72″ x 192″
Courtesy of Pam Adler Gallery, New York

In the catalogue height precedes width precedes depth, unless noted otherwise.