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ART: EXPRESSIONISM AND GEORGE MCNEIL

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GEORGE MCNEIL'S career is an object lesson and, in the end, a triumph. This New York painter, whose recent paintings seem to be the work of someone who has been independent and irreverent all his life, spent years trying to keep up with currents of European abstraction and Abstract Expressionism. It is only in the last 10 years that the 76-year old artist has been able to liberate himself from a sense of artistic obligation and begin cavorting and frolicking about in the funny, unpredictable, Dionysian waters that are his alone.

Although there are flashes of brilliance in McNeil's work almost from the beginning, only the recent paintings seem fully inspired. With his toothy, moon-faced people, their eyes darting about their heads, their feet kicking at the edges of the canvas like broncos flailing at the confines of their corrals, McNeil has invented his own race of people. In addition, he has given them flesh and blood by means of an original use of color that has been studied by younger artists. The more McNeil has allowed the human comedy within him to tumble onto the canvas in all its

variety and spice, the more vigorous and youthful his work has become.

"George McNeil Expressionism 1954-1984," at the Artists' Choice Museum, 394 West Broadway, through Nov. 10, contains 27 paintings and six lithographs, roughly one work from each of the last 30 years. The exhibition focuses on the artist's sustained dialogue with Abstract Expressionism. It does not suggest the early years when McNeil, aware of the artistic breakthroughs in Paris, began his long struggle to be expressive and structural at the same time.

For roughly two-thirds of the exhibition, we see McNeil trying to resolve this struggle within an Abstract Expressionist framework. He was committed to a logical approach to composition learned from Hans Hofmann, with whom he studied in the 1930's, as well as to a free-wheeling approach to paint most identified with Willem de Kooning. In addition, no matter where he was and what he did, even when the inspiration was Mediterranean, he never strayed far from the hipness, sadness and violence of New York City streets.

I don't know whether a gestural approach to paint, a highly structured sense of space and a commitment to specific narrative subject matter can be reconciled. At any rate, there are problems in the 1954-74 works, including an inability to sustain a figure and ground relationship throughout the canvas. This is the main reason, I think, why the shape of McNeil's canvases rarely feels right. Although the earlier works in the show provide consistent evidence of a born painter - look at the white crescent under the eye of the fat woman "Marcella," which McNeil laid on directly from the tube - the works from the mid-1950's to the mid-1970's rarely hold together.

Then something happened. Surely it had something to do with the late work of Philip Guston, which blazed a trail away from Abstract Expressionism - indeed, away from all artistic dogma - via a highly personal figurative style. Whatever the reason, in the mid-1970's McNeil began to express his responses to the world around him in a more personal and immediate way than before.

In the show's last group of paintings, McNeil finds a resolution to the figure-ground problem through an approach to color that probably goes back to Symbolism and Vuillard. In the 1979 "Beautiful People 2," the interior space between the goofy, well-dressed couple is not architectural, not background, but so bound psychologically to the couple's vain and ridiculous pretensions that the distinction between figure and ground ceases to exist.

In the 1977 "Joey Loves Milly," the outrageous pinks, blues and greens - each of equal value - that are used to define the setting seem like the inner heat of a street scene in which a man in striped pants and hat is embracing his adoring, nestling woman. Everything in the painting is of a piece. In works like these, McNeil's color and distortions of scale bring to mind the richly human exaggerations of the Comedia dell'Arte. If he avoids the coyness that can accompany his kind of popular imagery, there is every reason to believe that McNeil's best work is still to come.

Also of interest this week: Imants Tillers (Bess Cutler, 164 Mercer): Imants Tillers is one of the Australian artists who has recently been given exposure in New York. As with an endless number of contemporary artists, his work is about the appropriation of images. Since Tillers is Australian, however, and almost all the artistic images he feels he must come to terms with are somewhere across the sea, his obsession with magazine imagery has an unusual scope.

Everything in Tillers's paintings comes from magazines. Popular and folk images are mixed with traces of Jonathan Borofksy, Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, Giorgio de Chirico and Malcolm Morley. Often the only way in which Tillers can try to understand artists like these is through the distorted color and scale of reproductions. When he copies paintings from illustrations, as he does in the show, the distance from the original is clear. In "The Vortex," the largest work in the show, Imants paints a giant blow-up of an early work by de Chirico and bombards it with other images, suggesting Antonin Arthaud, Chia, David Salle and others.

Each painting is made up of numbered 10-by-15-inch canvas boards, which Tillers sometimes exhibits in piles. The boards are painted individually rather than after assembling them on the wall, which creates a sense of disjunction that increases the distance from the original. What is most intriguing about these works is that Tillers has essentially painted them not with a brush but with his fingers. The awkwardness of the result further reinforces the sense of an unbridgeable distance between media images and what they represent. This exhibition brings to mind the scene in Ingmar Bergman's "Persona" in which a boy runs his hands over a screen, groping for a mysterious reality, in his case a woman, who seems terribly immediate and yet hopelessly inaccessible at the same time. (Through Oct. 27.)

Anne and Patrick Poirier (Sonnabend, 420 West Broadway): Like Charles Simonds, Anne and Patrick Poirier are committed to building ruins. They are after a form of artistic expression in which sculpture and architecture, as well as different

systems of thought, run together. Their references to Freud leave no doubt but that their miniature Greco-Latin amphitheatres, temples and hillsides are, on one level, metaphors, through which they hope to tap the deepest archeological recesses of memory.

One way in which the Poiriers try to lead us beyond our "own dimensions" and our familiar "connection with reality" is by manipulating scale. Around 1980, they began juxtaposing forms that were disproportionately small with others that were disproportionately large. Most of the objects in this exhibition are based on the myth of the Medusa - a myth rich in meaning for sculptors, concerned as the Poiriers are with the way sculpture holds viewers with le regard, or its look.

One gallery contains a huge bronze sword, suggesting the sword with which Perseus cut off Medusa's head, alongside a shield with her head on it, identified with the shield that eventually became Athena's breastplate. In another gallery, we encounter Pegasus, the winged horse who was born of the sea foam and blood of the slaughtered Medusa, whose campy blue presence towers over charred ruins.

In "Mimas," the most effective work in the show, a huge bronze eye overlooks a ruined amphitheater while a huge arrow - for the Poiriers a "sign of the gods" - is imbedded in the reflecting pool alongside it. There is a slight trickle of water coming from the pupil of the eye so that the eye seems to be mourning. Although this work has an evocative power, in the work as a whole, the artistic and conceptual intelligence remains unequal. (Through Oct. 13.)

Louis Finkelstein - Landscapes and Allegories 1982-84 (Ingber, 460 West Broadway): Part of this show is an attempt to raise the issue of allegory. Louis Finkelstein argues for its viability in contemporary art by presenting allegorical paintings, filled with classical nudes, and then offering interpretative clues in an accompanying statement. As long as a shared belief in classical knowledge does not exist, it will continue to be almost impossible for a present-day viewer to be drawn into contemporary work based on clearly allegorical classical forms.

Finkelstein's landscapes are a different story. He is concerned here with an issue that will never lose its urgency - how an artist deals with all that mediates his perception of his work and the visible world. These impressionistically painted, well-structured landscapes are meant to bring to mind major landscape painters such as Cezanne, Corot, Monet and Constable. Instead of trying to go beyond these influences and paint landscapes that are totally objective or totally his own,

Finkelstein seems to be searching for a point of intersection at which the results will be equally the landscape itself, the artist who mediated his perception of it and him.

(Through tomorrow.)

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