

A Printmaker's Paradise

Recent Acquisitions of the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Part Two: 1950-1991
at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor

BY JAMEY BRZEZINSKI

The exhibition of recent acquisitions from the Achenbach Foundation at the Palace of the Legion of Honor combines the work of a good many well-known artists with work of up-and-coming younger artists in what has become the only continuing exhibition of this sort in the Bay Area. Curator Robert Flynn Johnson's practice of reviewing individual artist's portfolios has reaped a treasure trove of works on paper. Over the years, he has developed an eye for younger artists of promise for inclusion in a collection that now totals almost 115,000 works on paper, and he is to be applauded as the only curator at a major Bay Area museum who is willing to consider the acquisition and exhibition of local talent as part of his mandate.

The big names are here, of course. Prominent Bay Area artists such as Manual Neri, William T. Wiley, Robert Arneson and Raymond Saunders join Susan Rothenberg, Masami Teraoka, Donald Judd, Jim Dine, Fernand Léger, George Tooker and Leonard Baskin in what really is one helluva group show. We see more diminutive musings by artists who generally work in and on materials other than paper, and the result is a scaled-down vision that often demonstrates that size isn't everything. Judd's cadmium yellow rectangles are as minimal as woodcut can be. Arneson cracks a few jokes and Wiley takes us on a Zen-Euclidian flight through his usual eye-rolling punsmartness.

Some less prominent artists hold up as well, though. In his painting, *In the Woods*, Rick Arnitz, who has become very visible lately, uses oil-based enamels to yield a vibrancy and luminosity from simply repetitive horizontal stripes. *HISTN CHPL HL*, a large charcoal drawing by Randy Twaddle, contrasts the stark silhouette of power pole transformers with the lyrical beauty of their sagging cables, as well as the graceful branches and the soft values of

the background. But these two artists typify the extent of Johnson's curatorial eye. Abstract and non-objective pieces, such as the strikingly formal mixed media piece by John Millei, serve as a foil for representational works such as Susan Hauptman's large charcoal and pastel drawing, *Untitled (Eagle)*. This piece testifies to the power of realist imagery—picture versus words. Johnson makes no bones about his interest in new

realism, a form sadly neglected during the heyday of this past long decade. Yet, he ably balances this interest with a selection of works in the now-traditional esthetics of non-objectification.

The idiosyncratic aspect of the Bay Area is a strong suit. Although many galleries, museums and even art departments here seem to march in lock-step with New York fashion, the serious

viewer can always find work that has originality rather than precedent as an emphasis. *The Heart and All the Bones of the Foot*, a delightful small gouache painting by Robert Schwartz, illustrates this. Still—a small portion of the work here does lean too heavily on precedent and thus becomes derivative, decorative, or so textually ambitious that it falls visually. But, given the commerce in prod-

uct and ideas that is contemporary art, these pieces serve a function in the context of the show. It does seem that the older artists have a better sense of humor than their younger counterparts. Perhaps this is a reflection of where and when one comes up; an accident of birth.

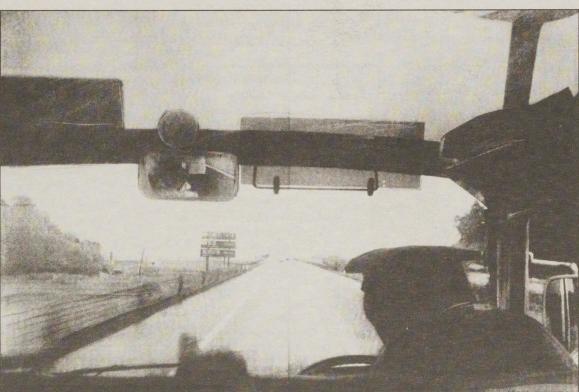
Other artists, such as Stephen Douglas and Eleanor Dickinson, present figurative works that stand up well simply because of their beautiful drawing abilities. Krystyna Piotrowska's offset lithograph, *The Mirror*, takes drawing a step further, fracturing the image and translating it through photo-mechanical processing. *Hare #13*, by Bathsheba Vieghe, emerges from the shadows, a fierce and brooding critter with animal passions in mind. The magnetism of this image contrasts with the fussiness of Beth Van Hoesen's intaglio, *Bobcat (Rufus)*. *Chamber*, an intaglio by Koji Higashi, is an action-packed image that's less than a foot square in size but so full of imagery that one could spend an hour looking and still find more. Another extraordinary print is the late Charles Surendorff's *Self-Portrait with Freshly Fried Egg*, which depicts the artist frying an egg while surrounded, like St. Anthony, by temptation couched in the archaic terms of 1964. It reflects how much attitudes toward gender and sexuality have changed in the intervening quarter century.

Appropriately, a varied selection of artist's books completes the show.

Recent Acquisitions is comprehensive, and, by bringing together what might be called a career-diverse group of artists, the show draws some telling comparisons among a variety of approaches to the question of two dimensions. Surface and illusion are braided in debate throughout the history of twentieth century art; here, the printerly concerns of serial imagery, process and fastidious draftsmanship dominate the swashbuckle of paint. In a group review, this is a very pleasant change of pace. ■



Clockwise from left: Oldrich Kulhanek, *Shriek*, 1983, lithograph, 482 mm x 375 mm; Nick Quijano Torres, *El Gallo*, 1983, 1983, graphite and charcoal on paper and board, 205 mm x 143 mm; and Tetsuya Noda, *Dinner July 11th '80 to Merita*, 1980, woodcut and silkscreen, 438 mm x 659 mm, all at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco.



Recent Acquisitions of the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Part Two: 1950-1991 through December 8 at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, 14th Avenue and Clement Street, San Francisco.

Cultural Confrontation

Art and Society: Face to Face at Wiegand Gallery,
College of Notre Dame

BY CASEY FITZSIMONS

All art is social in the sense that it reflects the society which produced the artist; every personal agenda is formed in accordance with or in reaction to community values. But the artist for whom consciousness-raising is itself the motivating force propounds a social judgment and can be an exponent of change. This deliberate, self-conscious approach is the point of departure for the three artists in this show.

Lenny Silverberg presents an array of faces, portraits of the homeless noted as to time and place of encounter, in *Street Portraits, 1989-1991*. The number of images testifies to his thought and involvement; as a source of images certainly, the pool of homeless people is painfully large, and the repetition of a classical format—size, scale and composition—underscores their anonymity. The secondary images, created with caps and hands and clothing, are the most interesting aspect of the work, an element of counter-portrait that Silverberg never quite involves with the whole picture plane, to the detriment of formal possibili-

ties. The most inventive of these are *Spring Street Station, Park Avenue* and *Port Authority*, which nevertheless retain an immutable figure-ground form.

The individual images are skillful integrations of line and mass. The occasional outline is reminiscent of Daumier, as in *Croby*, and lends a distance that is a bit anthropological; the direct van Gogh-esque hatching in *IBM Atrium* seems more felt. Silverberg's mastery of organic drawing is evident in unaffected single-complex compositions, especially *Tompkins Square*, and the Goya-like directness of *Essex Street* and *Greenwich Street* are examples of this self-confidence. When the interest in facial features carries the image, though, the dependence on formal short-changes the observation, decorative scumbling in passive spaces is a superficial treatment that lightens impact, and the Degas-like palette is irritatingly pleasant. That the artist's encounters always result in a portrait, a face, denies variety in the artist's own experience, so that the combined effect is one of quantity only, a true-enough statement, and less

one of individual insight.

Work by Hulleah J. Tsinnahjinnie falls into two categories—color photos of modern Native Americans in situations that highlight their fading cultural identity, and photo-montages that metaphorically convey this dissolution. In the first category are pictures which document the mixture of traditional ceremony and authentic culture with the homogenizing incursions of pop trash and daily trivia. These can be too obvious. In *Hin-Hut (Woman on Horse)*, a young Native American woman pauses in a wistful contemplation of the rolling hills before a river, but in this case, the river is a meandering asphalt freeway. The sentiment is so obvious as to appear staged, and it robs the image of the very paths it seeks to convey.

More effective are Tsinnahjinnie's interpretive works. In *Mattie Rides a Bit Too Far*, a Native American child rides perilously into a synthetic background of polka dots. The beauti-



Lenny Silverberg, (clockwise from top left): *East Broadway, 1990*; *42nd St. Tunnel, 1991*; *IBM Atrium, 1991*; and *Cleveland Place, 1980*, oil on plastic-coated paper, 18" x 24" each, at Wiegand Gallery, College of Notre Dame, Belmont.

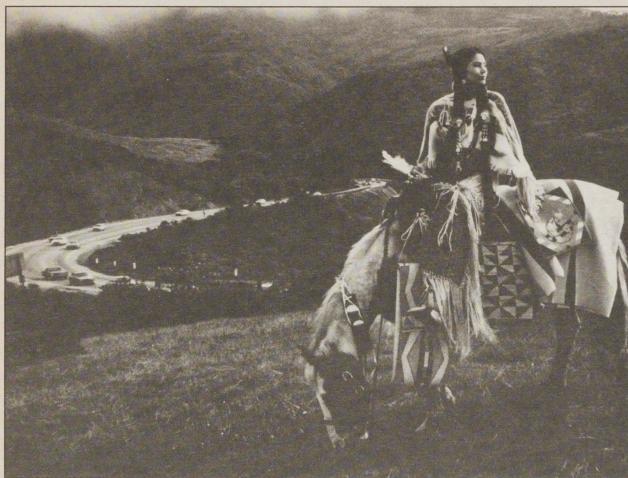
ful composition of *Mattie Goes Traveling* combines the arching chrome detail of an old car with the intricate pattern of Native American decoration in a poignant intersection of times and cultures. *Mattie Visits the Ancestral Homelands*

is a telling juxtaposition of the smug self-satisfaction of the homesteaders, their transplanted architecture and blarant but barren culture, in contrast to the richly textured but subjugated vitality of the Native American culture. Wherever one stands on these issues, the problem has been articulated as a statement of loss, bewilderment and indictment.

Adam Simon approaches social issues cerebrally. *Missing* is a conceptual piece, succinctly allegorical if somewhat bland, that uses the "happy face" to underscore the anonymity of the many missing children and to con-

trast their fate with their essence as innocents. In his accompanying text, Stacy Moss gives a cogent and sympathetic rationale for Simon's repressed painting impulse, and sheds some light on the irresolute development of *Triborough Bridge Episode*. As an incident that illustrates the phenomenon of collective stress in a work environment, the events are socially important; as a work of art, the canvases that assemble or replicate bits of documentation refer to events without telling a story and illustrate visual elements without the impact of social judgment.

In his role as social commentator, Simon will have to overcome petulance to make a stronger statement: it is determined, instinctual expression that commands attention, not the suppression of expression as a way of catering to supposed prejudices. The keenness of true empathy is conveyed not only by a poignant image, but also by the energy of the approach. If an artist is distracted by conceptual issues of painting or with the public's reception of the work, then his response to the underlying social concerns is called into doubt. ■



Hulleah J. Tsinnahjinnie, *Untitled, 1991*, color photograph, 16" x 20", at Wiegand Gallery, College of Notre Dame, Belmont.

Art and Society: Face to Face through December 14 at Wiegand Gallery, College of Notre Dame, 1500 Ralston Ave., Bel-

The first installment of this dialogue about Judy Baca's *World Wall* project ran last week, in the November 14 issue of Artweek.

Towards a World in Balance

A conversation with Judy Baca: Part 2

BY MOIRA ROTH

Moira Roth As you know, I came down to see the two-day Plaza de la Raza installation of the *World Wall*. Families came and spent a long time there, and children appeared as interested as the adults in the murals. Not only was there a lot of looking but there was a great deal of intense discussion—families would crowd around a panel and talk about it.

Judy Baca Yes. The thing that's interesting to me is that the parents really thought it was a place to take their children—I really liked that a lot. I think it is a sort of testimony to the previous work I've done in Los Angeles, where the children have always been welcomed, indeed, have often been part of the mural process. Over the years, the murals have created that sensitivity in the city. The thing I was amazed by this time was the dialogue that occurred at the site among these people and with the children. They were really involved in the dialogue. Alan Nakasawa, our education coordinator at SPARC [Social & Public Art Resource Center], brought a group of children along—and they talked about the future, what their vision of the future was. And then there was Jason, this wonderful eight-year-old kid, who told me that the panels needed more children in them since children were the future.

MR He was a remarkable child. Generally, there was something very special about the fact that the first real showing of the *World Wall* in this country took place in East Los Angeles.

JB It was a homecoming for the *World Wall*. Back to its origins. The

World Wall has a strong relationship with the mural movement in Los Angeles, with its precedence in the Mexican murals and the fact that my earlier work related to interracial relations. I like it that the *World Wall* takes what I learned in the neighborhoods of East Los Angeles and the city of Los Angeles, which is an international city fraught with conflicts between people of various cultures who live in adjoining neighborhoods. It takes the lessons I learned while making my earlier mural work, which was conceptualized in that geographic framework, and applies it on an international scale. It is my belief that, as Third World people in the United States, we are really positioned to do such work on an international scale. We have a unique position—in fact we are sort of the "bridge" people between the United States and other cultures. We have the information that they need. In other words, we are the best ambassadors.

I'd like to talk about another issue here concerning the mural art form. It is one of the few forms which is denigrated because of its association with minorities. There is a prevalent point of view about the mural art form—because of its relationship to minority audiences, its relationship to Mexico, and perhaps its relationship to the WPA—that it is not high art. For example, during the Plaza de la Raza exhibition, we called a local radio station which is known for its arts program, and they said they wouldn't cover the event because it wasn't fine art. Part of the *World Wall's* intention is to take something from the neighborhoods

—born, bred, honed and professionalized in that setting, an art form that has grown to its full status within the neighborhood milieu—and bring it to an international audience. I like it that the *World Wall* takes a supposed ghetto art form out of its place and moves it into an international arena. People ask, "Why are these not just a series of paintings? Why see them as a mural series?" A mural is defined by its relationship to architecture. The *World Wall* has made its own architecture by the creation of an interior space with a prescribed relationship to the viewer. The relationship is a very studied one between the person inside the space and the panels themselves. The installation's system of poles and cables allows the murals to become walls rather than to be painted on walls.

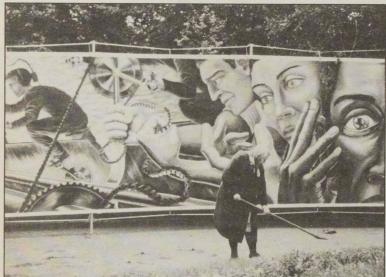
MR What do you think are some of the similarities and differences between the *World Wall* and your earlier work? *The Great Wall*, for example, or the more recent project in 1990 in Guadalupe, which is some three hours north of Los Angeles by car.

JB The *Great Wall* in Los Angeles is a highly urbanized piece, positioned in the center of the city, and it makes connections between ethnic groups; it is a collective view of the history of a multiethnic population. It includes lost information about people's history. The Guadalupe project is in a rural setting; a small town with a farming community. Again, it's between ethnic groups, but it also has to do with the future of the place. So the Los Angeles and Guadalupe pieces are two extremes, but they basically apply the same process. In both, I gathered historical information. In preparing for the *Great Wall*, for example, I asked Chinese-American, Native American, Asian-American and Latino historians to provide history—for example, Chinese history in the 1920s. They would present papers and there would be a big collaborative session—which is

really one of my favorite things. I like seeing everyone in the same room because they normally never meet, you know. It is always a shocker that the Chinese historians rarely speak to the Native American historians and so on—yet they have so much in common. So when they are in this collaborative group in which they share papers and a discussion ensues, I get to be a witness, like a little ant; I get to sit on the wall and hear all these wonderful discoveries they make about each other. Then the next level of information comes from regular people who have lived through the period. That's an oral presentation of an experiential information that cannot be replaced.

In Guadalupe, there was almost no written information, so we had to go to people's sources like letters, family albums and photographs, sometimes newspaper articles. Then there were people's stories and, finally, collaborations between all the people, all the ethnic groups from the Portuguese to the Filipino to the Mexican farmworkers. All of them talking about the future of this place in which they had all been born, lived and probably would die. What they saw for the future became one of the topics of the mural.

The *World Wall* is an international piece and the global geography involved makes it inherently different. It has to rely on media information, ecological information, media systems and on technology for a part of its collaboration. It is not unlike my other work in that it looks for the commonality between people. I am interested in what the Soviet Union, South Africa and Canada (as Canada is developing perhaps the most important constitutional changes to recognize Native rights) have in common at this moment of change. What can they teach us as we develop our plan for the transition of a society toward peace? The source for all this information in the *World Wall* is the artist who, historically, in most societies around the world, has been thought of as a visionary, or at least as a chronicler of his/her time. So, I am asking artists to take on this role again and to develop their own process of input, and speak about this time for their country.



A Soviet woman in front of Judy Baca's *Triumph of the Heart* panel of the *World Wall* prepares the Gorky Park site for the wall exhibition in Moscow, July 1990. (Photo: Liya Vorobey.)

than that, the artists have free rein. I give them information about earlier discussions with other artists and so we are privileged to each other's discussions. One of the things I really like about the process is that we are all influenced by one another. That is partly why I have only completed four of my pieces so far; I don't want to formulate the ideas in the United States by myself. I don't want to conceive ideas about the transformation of a society of balance without hearing what they are thinking in other countries, what they are talking about, what discussions ensue when they think about the future of the world. It is interesting already that although my title for the project is "A Vision of the Future without Fear," the Soviet title is "The End of the Twentieth Century" and the Finnish one is "Alternative Dialogues."

MR You negotiated with the group of three Finnish artists differently than with Begov, the Soviet artist. You met them for the first time in the summer of 1990 after you had chosen them long distance.

JB Yes. The artists have seen the work I am doing, but they're not trying to deal with it inherently. They are not trying to add something to it so that their work would merely be an extension of mine but, rather, they are coming up with their own unique and different panels, ones that come from their own experience, their own styles of painting. There are no specific styles of painting that they need to follow for the murals, except that

particular pressure to come up with "universal" visual symbols because of the peculiarities of the Finnish language, and the fact that it is such an exceptionally difficult language that relatively few people know it.

JB ...then exchanges by letter and fax when I got back to the United States. Alexi would send me a drawing, and I would send him back faxes asking, "Can you see to the right of this image?" For example, one of the best discussions we had was when he sent me a drawing of a blind man with a cane looking toward the future. I fixed him, "What's just to the right of the cane?" You know, that kind of discussion was going back and forth urging him to see the future in perhaps a more hopeful way—if there was hope, I wanted to find it.

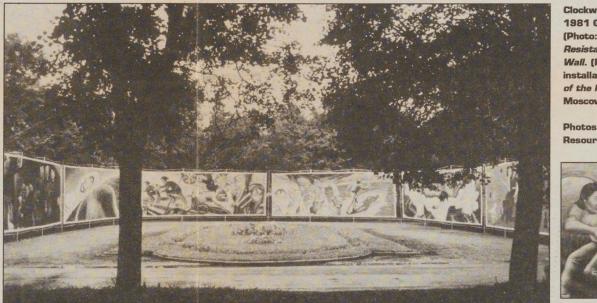
MR Because his mural does contain a sense of gloom with his blind man and stumbling figures.

JB Despair. A great amount of despair. He really does deal with a sentiment which I think is very prevalent in the Soviet Union right now. Hope is a distant idea. I don't think there is a lot of hope there because people are convinced that

they decided to use these universal symbols. What the Finnish are doing is making symbols that people will recognize anywhere in the world. For example, the central image of their mural is of a person struggling toward a higher self. They see two sorts of men in this struggle; the figure is trying to move to the light on the right and is held down by his lower self.

For me, their symbols are like a cacophony of sounds. One of the most amazing images is their blind man who looks almost like the blind man that Alexi uses in the next panel.

MR An odd coincidence, because the two panels were done without any contact between the artists. As



you and I were together in your initial visit to the Soviet Union at the beginning of 1990, when you met Alexi Begov, maybe we can reconstruct that time a little?

JB What I search for is a person who is thinking about the ideas already—rather than trying to find an artist who would be willing to create a mural—and who can work

MR I remember also after he agreed to do the mural, and we all toasted in Russian champagne, you went for a ride together in snow-covered Moscow to look for possible sites. One was near a 400-year-old summer residence of the czars along the Moscow river.

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particular pressure to come up with "universal" visual symbols because of the peculiarities of the Finnish language, and the fact that it is such an exceptionally difficult language that relatively few people know it.

summer—and the new addition of the Soviet panel.

Julia Kirillova When Judy arrived the second time in Moscow in the summer, it was a miracle for me. It was a terrible time in the Soviet Union, when people were thinking only about their problems: how to get food and money, how to make ends meet and feed their families. In this atmosphere and with the impossible bureaucracy of our authorities who hate change, it was a miracle that Judy was able to come to Moscow with a project as big as the *World Wall*. She came bringing thousands of pounds of equipment, nine crates and two assistants.

How was Judy during such a time able to arrange this significant show in Gorky Park, which is in the center of Moscow? Only after it actually happened did I understand why and how it had been possible. This woman had a magnificent idea, and when she talked with people whom she met in Moscow and explained her ideas, they began to see the possibility of imagining a future without fear. Many people began to help Judy. I remember how the workers who set up the *World Wall* in Gorky Park would talk about Judy among themselves. They said, this is a person who brings hope and gives the gift of interest in life. Many people came to the opening in the park; many people came more than once, and brought their children back because they wanted to open the children's minds and eyes to the murals. When Judy spoke at the opening, I watched people nod their heads in agreement with her message. You know, flowers are rare now in Moscow, but at the opening Judy received so many flowers from people's gardens that it took four people to carry the flowers back to the reception. People who live outside Moscow would call me on the phone and ask me to convey to Judy their support and thanks for her having come such a long distance to bring such an important idea.

During the last terrible winter [1990-1991], when people spent half of each day in the freezing cold standing in long lines for bread, I heard people speak about the *World Wall*. It was like a little fire warming them, reminding them that things could change. People often think now in the Soviet Union that their lives are ended, that things will only grow worse, and the famine will become even more widespread. People lose their hope but when they think of the *World Wall*, they can think of another possibility, a better future.

Postscript: Galiano, Canada, late 1991

Baca arranged for Julia Kirillova, the artist who had helped her in the Soviet negotiations and who has become a friend, to visit the United States for several months. We asked Kirillova, who was temporarily staying in Baca's studio-home on Galiano Island, off the Canadian coast, to describe the events and impact of Baca's second visit to Moscow in the summer of 1990. This time, Baca installed the *World Wall*, which contained her own four panels, plus the Finnish panel—completed earlier in the

Paint It Black

continued from page 1

in a feisty, witty rejection of all anecdote and narrative content from painting. "Art should be independent of all clap-trap ... emotions, devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like," Whistler wrote, but they could be Reinhardt's words. Both were greeted with angry rejection from the public and critics. Both had a deep interest in Japanese art. Whistler, in the early 1860s, was one of the first Western artists to collect Japanese art ("They never strive for contrast," he wrote, "on the contrary, they seek repetition"). Both painters reduced the canvas to the slightest tonal variations. Whistler's portrait of Frederick Leyland, except for hands and face, is simply an *Arrangement in Black*. Look at a Reinhardt painting from the 1960s, and listen to Whistler describe one of his *Nocturnes* in 1878: "As the light fades and the shadows deepen, all the petty and exacting details vanish; everything trivial disappears ... the buttons are lost, but the garment remains; the sitter is lost but the shadow remains; the shadow is lost but the picture remains. And that, night cannot efface from the painter's imagination."

Nothing in the painting: "No realism, no impressionism, no expressionism ... no texture, no brushwork, no sketching or draw-

ing, no forms, no design, no colors, no light, no space, no time, no size or scale, no movement, no object, no subject, no matter ..." Reinhardt's dozens of published statements burn the page like a demonic chant. Ultimately, though, through his endless chain of negations, he does not arrive at nihilism but at those powerful black paintings. His odes to blackness reverse the negative associations of that color in the way that Melville, in the "Whiteness of the Whale" chapter of *Moby Dick*, reversed the positive connotations of the color white. Reinhardt, who studied at Columbia with the great Melville scholar Raymond Weaver, was aware of the spin he was putting on this tradition. But something else echoed in my ears as I read Reinhardt, and suddenly, it dawned on me. "There is no form, no feeling, no perception, no impulse, no consciousness, no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no forms, no smells ...". Surely, Ad Reinhardt had read the Buddhist *Heart Sutra*.

Reinhardt's writings are filled with references to Asian aesthetics and Buddhist philosophy. He quotes Chang Yen-yuan and Hokusai. He mentions the Buddhist "five hindrances," the "blowing out" of the ego, and the change from "wrong seeing (*dukkha*) into correct seeing (*sukha*). He denied that the paintings were about, or had any

relation to, Buddhism or any other religion; his interest in Asian ideas, however, is worth examining. Although his painting can easily be seen as the inevitable result in a series of steps along a line of modernist art, he disliked that view. He disliked progress, and breakthrough, and "vanguardism." He liked, on the other hand, continuity, repetition and timelessness, all of which he saw in Asian art. And I think that is one of the great lessons he teaches: that if we are going to get outside of this timeline of movements, to get there not by looking forward or backward, but by looking elsewhere.

Although Reinhardt mentions mandalas and mantras, these paintings are not objects for Buddhist meditation, but the experience of looking at them is in some ways analogous to that activity. I have in mind especially that radical Southeast Asian style of meditation called "Insight," or *vipassana*.



Ad Reinhardt, *Calligraphic Painting*, 1949-50, oil on canvas, 50" x 20", at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Left: Ad Reinhardt, *Untitled (Red and Grey)*, 1950, oil on canvas, 80" x 60", at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Below: Ad Reinhardt painting in progress, 1966.

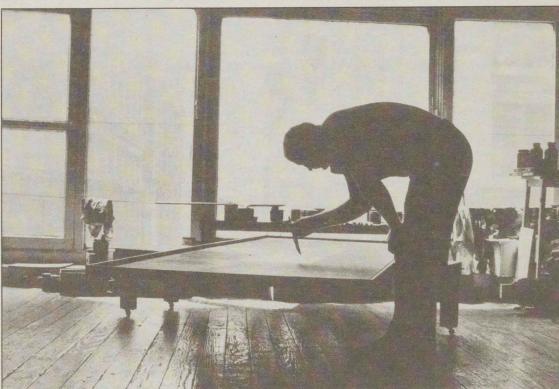
In *vipassana*, the perceptions, the feelings, the thoughts are observed with detachment as they arise in reaction to external factors, then pass away only to be replaced by another which then, for a time, occupies our consciousness. The objects of consciousness arise and are replaced, and are replaced, says one of those vivid similes from the early Pali sutras, like branches passing through the grasp of a monkey as it swings among the trees. Just as, when we watch (I don't say "look at") an Ad Reinhardt "black" painting, we don't watch the painting as much as we watch our own internal perceptions. First, nothing is there. Then, after several minutes, perhaps the vague edge of a square ("neither hard edge nor soft edge") begins to appear. It does not remain. Try as you might, your eye cannot hold it. Eventually, perhaps after fifteen minutes, the entire grid of twenty-inch squares may snap briefly into view, but then, just as suddenly, you are staring at a piece of black satin. You think you may see colors, but you are unable to name them. When you move to another canvas, this one is hot. You look back at the other, it's icy cold.

Why? When you move back and look at the whole row of paintings, they are all the same. Black, black, black.

What is perception? Like Western philosophy and psychology, Buddhism distinguishes between sensation and perception. Like structuralist theories of perception, moreover, Buddhism says that perceptions are constructs that are secondarily attached to sensations. Buddhism considers perception as just one of the conglomerate "heaps" along with our thoughts, feelings, body parts, and sensations, that we wishfully call "me." But just as our percepts are the material objects of our vision, the act of seeing, therefore, says one Theravada commentator, is delusion trying to grasp illusion. Just so watching an Ad Reinhardt. You cannot cling to any perception. All you can do is watch your perception trying to grasp the impermanent. The mind of the meditator, writes this same commentator (Bhikkhu Nanananda, who, I don't suppose, ever read a French deconstructionist), "delights in the perception of nothingness, the perception of neither perception nor non-perception, the mental concentration based on the signless."

But I want to give the last word to Ad Reinhardt, from a review he wrote of an exhibit of Chinese landscape painting. "The nothingness, the empty, quiet, pervasive Sung paintings," he wrote, "may have something to do with the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, but I doubt it."

Ad Reinhardt through January 5 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles.



Rituals and Allegories

Felix Gonzalez-Torres at Luhring Augustine Hetzler

BY R.J. MERRILL

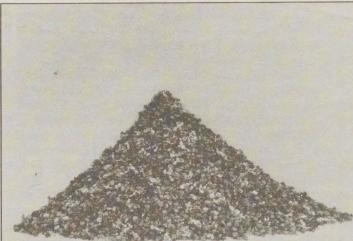
Because they lack definitive boundaries, the individual works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres are difficult to discuss. They are not any one thing, but, rather, an accumulation of a seemingly infinite number of things. For example: his candy spills consist of hundreds of pounds of individually wrapped candy pieces piled into a corner or spread across the gallery floor. The beholder is encouraged to eat a piece, if so inclined. There are stacks of oversized sheets of paper on which are printed political quotes, brooding seascapes or solid fields of color. These sheets, like the candy, are free for the taking. As the work is so diminished, more candy is added and additional sheets of paper are placed on the stacks to maintain what the artist describes as their ideal height or weight.

One wonders about the parameters of the body of these works. In both theory and practice, Gonzalez-Torres creates things that stretch back to the source from which they came, and from which they will indefinitely come. The work gains further extension as the beholder ingests the candy or takes a sheet and moves out into the world. It literally overflows the confines of the gallery; it defies the stricture of the "art space" and rejects its authority in the establishment of legitimacy and meaning. These candy spills and paper stacks are not contained in any traditional sense by either the gallery or by their own physicality. They are free to exist with and within the beholder, thereby collapsing the conceptual and physical space which has separated the beholder from the work and art from life.

The possibility of owning a Gonzalez-Torres without a capital outlay offers a refreshing antidote to the constant pressure that capitalist forces exert on the art object. The artist's intention, in his employment of mass-produced and inexpensive materials bought in bulk and easily replenished, is to further frustrate the process of commodification. Gonzalez-Torres has created non-elitist and democratic works which counter the notion of art as

a capital investment available only to a relative few.

One cannot speak of these works as monolithic bodies, for they are infinite in their scope and scale. Yet, one can speak of them as *metaphorical* references to a body. In *Untitled*, subtitled *Portrait of Ross in LA*, 175 pounds of candy spill against a corner. The amount of candy corresponds to the weight of the artist's lover before his battle with AIDS. The literal presence of the candy stands in for the once physical body of Ross. In another spiral, this one subtitled *Public Opinion*, Gonzalez-Torres spreads 700 pounds of cellophane-wrapped black rod licorice across several square yards of the gallery floor.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA)*, 1991, 175 lbs. of fruit flavor candy, at Luhring Augustine Hetzler, Santa Monica.

The artist's view of public opinion is indicated, I am told, by the resemblance of the licorice to suppositories. Like *Portrait of Ross in LA*, it is an allegorical representation of a body—in this case the body of public opinion. In other words—the paper stack *Untitled (National Rifle Association)* with its bloodied pages and *Untitled (Supreme Majority)*, with its seven dunce caps representing the conservative body of the Supreme

Court—the body is the body politic.

The invitation to take or consume a piece of these works can be conceptually linked to the invitation of Christ to the faithful at every Christian mass, "take, eat, this is my body which is given for you: do this in remembrance of me." The consumption of the bread and wine for the Christian is an act of union with the divine and, in the sharing of the com-

mon cup, an acknowledgment of membership in the corporate body of the institutional church. To eat, therefore, is not only an act of redemption, but one of unity with the whole body of humankind.

Gonzalez-Torres's Cuban (and presumably Catholic) heritage warrants the exploration of this link with Christian theology. But since the materials certainly are not Christian in content, one wonders if the consumption of the candy or the taking of sheets of paper are acts of redemption and union similar to the consumption of the elements in the mass. On a mythic or unconscious level, these works resonate with just such possibilities. On a secular and political level, the participation in such a ritual would bring home the immediacy of the AIDS epidemic and force the participant to recognize a union with the body of the infected individual through their shared humanity, regardless of political, racial or other differences.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres through November 16 at Luhring Augustine Hetzler, 1330 Fourth St., Santa Monica.

Issues of Self-Examination

Eugenio Vargas at CSU Long Beach

BY SUVAN GEER

If, as the saying goes, the eye is a camera, then the mind must be the darkroom where image/ideas develop into thoughts. At least that's the analogy which comes to mind in *Agua*, an installation by the Mexican conceptual artist Eugenia Vargas. Unfortunately, the installation's

darkroom is something of a quick read, which reduces a critical ecological problem to a series of rapid-fire vignettes with little amplification. However—as a suggestion of a mental space in which the individual weighs action and effect, it leads to more engaging considerations of personal and

professional ethics.

Agua is a bleak, coldly ordered space, part darkroom, part city morgue. It consists simply of four rows of dangling red bulbs, each hovering directly above a developer tray of water and a photograph which rest on the floor. The pictures are prosaic, undistinguished landscapes. What holds the viewer's interest is the viewing process—the way the weird illumination turns the act of deciphering the image into a subtle metaphor for recognizing the wrongness affecting the environment. With concentration, the picture congeals into a view of a river, which in turn appears strangely murky or thick with floating debris. Surely, the innocence of children and animals in these scenes is not scenic but alarming, for they live beside tainted water.

If it ended there, as a compressed visual equivalent of an



Eugenio Vargas,
detail of *Agua*,
mixed-media installation,
at the University Art Museum,
California State University,
Long Beach.

ecologist's nightmare of soured water, the piece would disappear among a lot of other eco-educational artwork being made today. Too many other artists—Vernon Fisher, Laurie Brown, Beverly Nadius and Mark Niblock-Smith—have made aspects of the environmental crisis into visually arresting or more engaging participatory experiences. Only in one last, almost imperceptible gesture, as Vargas leaves the pictures to degenerate in the trays of water, does her broader conceptual and moral dilemma play itself out.

This degeneration is a leap-ing off point for implications beyond the meaning of what is being viewed. At base, there is the realization that Vargas's act of willful destruction of the image is anathema to photography's quest for archival permanence. In this installation, the photo materials clearly are important, but curiously, the images are not. These images document the degeneration of the Lerma River, one of the most important water sources for Mexico City; yet they have none of the haunting beauty of

