# Art in America

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Cover: Roy Lichtenstein's "Stepping Out" (detail)
Edvard Munch/Vienna Moderne/Otto Wagner/Paolo Soleri/Nubian Art
Whitney Biennial '79/Lichtenstein/John Mason/Peter Gourfain
Report from Philadelphia/More on Challenge Grants

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MAY-JUNE 1979

## Feature Articles



## Issues & Commentary



## Departments



## Review of Exhibitions







**Cover:** A detail from Roy Lichtenstein's *Stepping Out*, 1978, oil and magna on canvas, 86 by 70 inches (collection of the artist). The painting is one of a new group of Surrealist-inspired works discussed in an article starting on page 100. Photo Bruce Jones.

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# Art, Inc.: The Whitney's 1979 Biennial

This year's survey of the current scene, low on risks and surprises, was largely a confirmation of what is known. It differed from its predecessors by being organized into stylistic categories and by being relatively well-received—both signs of the museum's new if somewhat disconcerting "corporate" smoothness.

BY WADE SAUNDERS

The 1979 Whitney Biennial comprised works by 57 artists in a painting, sculpture and drawing category and 31 artists in video and film, whose work I won't discuss here. The video and film programs made a lot of material accessible that is otherwise often hard to see. The painters and sculptors generally showed two works apiece, down from an average of three in 1977, up from the single work of almost all previous years. Only in 1977 were fewer artists exhibited. Nineteen of the 57 were showing in the Biennial for the first time, and 19 were women. It has been the most pleasantly received Biennial of the decade.

**Author:** Wade Saunders is a sculptor who teaches in Philadelphia.

The Whitney Museum is becoming smooth, corporate. Tom Armstrong writes in his catalogue preface, "Attendance has increased 100% in the last four years, and during the first three months of this fiscal year 17% of those attending the Museum were college and university students. . . . We feel we are providing a vital stimulus for a new period of awareness and understanding of American art." What the Whitney actually provided in this Biennial was a trade fair for New York dealers—49 of the artists presently have New York galleries, and six others have had in the past. The show confirms the solid positions of Paula Cooper, Blum-Helman, and Willard, which each represent five of the artists in the Biennial; of Holly Solomon, John Weber, and Leo Castelli, which have four; of Allan Frumkin and Pace, which showed three. The exhibition was popular because no one was disconcerted by seeing the unfamiliar.

This Biennial was a theme show focused on the following—for the curators—predominant attitudes and concerns: "new approaches toward the represented image; decorative, patterned, and repeated motif painting; the use of eccentric geometry in abstract painting; works that combine words and images; objects concerned with personal imagery or private mythology; painting and sculpture exploring various attitudes toward the human figure; extensions of minimalist concerns; and sculpture based on architectural or structural ideas." Many pieces linked as attitudes and concerns shared appearances but not meanings, a common problem with curatorial rubrics. Conspicuously missing were works in the loose categories of non-figurative representation, formalist painting and sculpture, and Conceptual art. Very little juicy painting of any description made it in.

The inclusions suggest both that the Whitney now imagines itself to be a traditional museum, a neutral party rather than an advocate, and contrarily, that it can't be bothered to remember what it's shown in the past. Instead of including the same artists over and over again—particularly those whose work is both familiar and changing slowly—

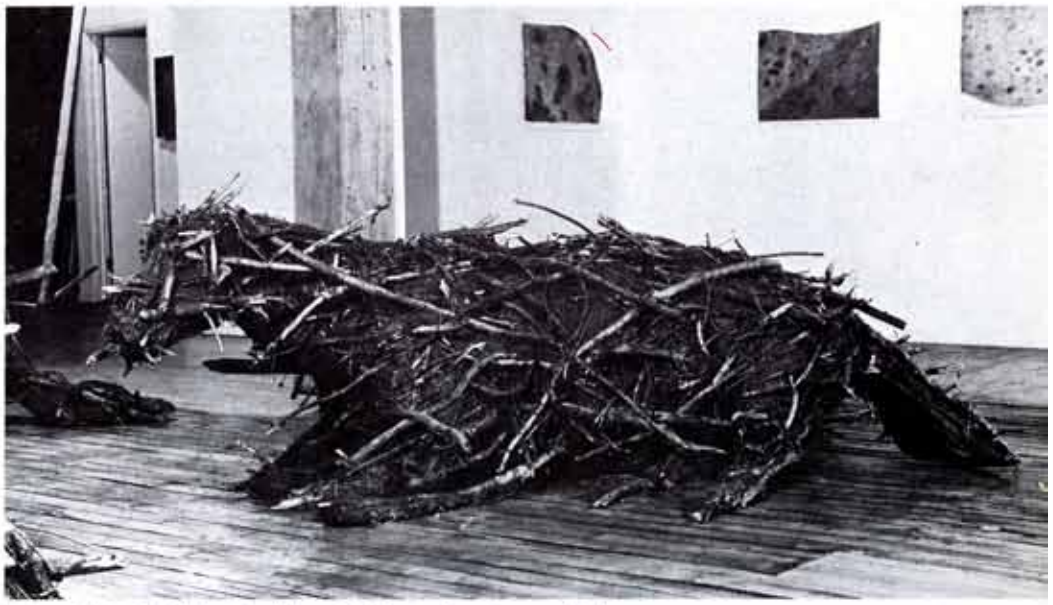
Philip Guston: *Friend—To M.F.*, 1978, oil on canvas, 68 by 88 inches. David McKee Gallery.

why not just set a little room aside for them permanently? Jennifer Bartlett was very much present in the Whitney's recent New Image show [see *A.i.A.*, March–April '79], as well as the Biennials of '77 and '72; Chuck Close was in the Biennials of '77, '72, '69; Brice Marden, '77, '73, '69; Dorothea Rockburne, '77, '73, '70; Richard Serra, '77, '73, '70, '68 (a perfect record for a sculptor); Christopher Wilmarth, '73, '70, '68, '66; Jacqueline Winsor, '77, '73 and '70. H.C. Westermann just had a retrospective at the Whitney, as well as being in the Biennials of '77, '73, '70 and '68. None of the people on this list were eligible for the "Virgins' Show" of 1975, as Amy Goldin dubbed it. In 1972 and 1969 only painting was shown, in 1970 and 1968 only sculpture.

Ironically, the show was short on genuine ancestor figures. Guston did most of that part for painting, though Pearlstein and Kelly were in the Annuals of the '50s. Guston's work is virtuous and extraordinary, grimy, derelict, tough, chancy. He has spent time painting; he demands time looking. His looming head, *Friend—To M.F.*, with massive eye, ear and cigar was outsize in this company. The two-partedness of Stella's work is notable. Certain decisions go into making the things, and then certain others, perhaps related, into painting them; his surface looks fast from a distance, but is actually full of incident. It is the work of a Puritan gone riot. And yet the paintings are strangely nostalgic, for French curves are as obsolete as mechanical adding machines. Ralph Humphrey's work is patient, palpable, centered, meditative. Things happen in the middle and at the edges. His scale is very cautious.

Kim MacConnel's sewn pieces were shown near those of Lucas Samaras. MacConnel's hangings are archeologies of certain sign mannerisms, embodying as they do the interchange between fine and applied art, while blurring that very distinction. He allows us to look at fabric for itself, not as the stuff of garments or household durables, so that we are able to see the kind of tastes patterns embody. Stenciled over the cloth in *Factory Brocade* are the images of a factory, a fish and something like the Eiffel Tower. The last must stand for romance, and the first for toil; he successfully conjoins lots of dissimilar things. The Samaras pieces—stretched like canvases—are full of the virtuosity that is his trademark. They are oversize and too consciously ambitious to be mistaken for quilts.

I like the making of the Joyce Kozloff pieces a lot; the care with the tiles, the willingness to open up her work and the need to put things back into the forms in which she found them, working into rather than from her sources. Billy Al Bengston remains canny and confident about decoration. He is a master of flat stretchers, thin paint and layering. His geometry is getting firmer and his painting more complex. Roger Brown has been working the same way for a long time. His paintings still fall apart up close. He's brave to tackle intractable stuff like pornography and Italian politics, but his silhouette style can't accommodate the shading of thought and meaning these subjects require. The Rodney Ripps looks done by rote, as if it were put together using a construction manual. No feel for scale here. His 21 feet of encaustic-covered cloth flowers lack the color or sense of his more modest work.



Deborah Butterfield: *Resting Horse*, 1977, steel armatures, chicken wire, twigs and clay mixture, 35 by 54 by 102 inches. Whitney Museum.

Kenneth Price: *Town Unit 2*, 1972-77, ceramic and painted wood, 70 by 39 by 20 inches. Collection James Corcoran.

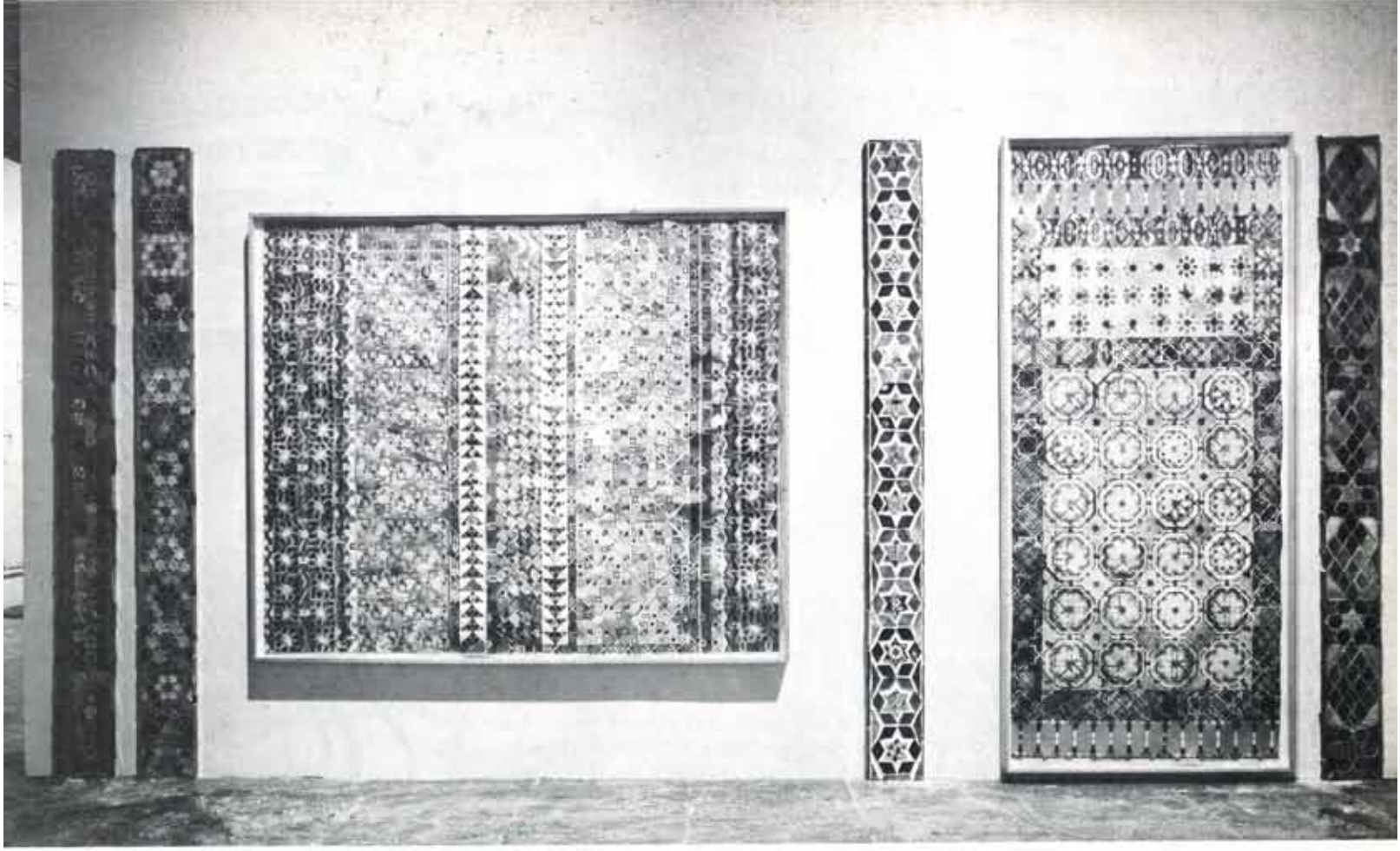
Robert Graham: *Lise Torso Painted 10-7-78*, oil and cloth on bronze, 27½ by 5 by 6 inches. Robert Miller Gallery.

Jonathan Borofsky wall drawing: *I Dreamed a Young Man in a Wheelchair was Making Beautiful Ink Drawings on Glass at 2,520,523*, 1978–79. Paula Cooper Gallery.

Kim MacConnel: *Factory Brocade*, 1978, acrylic and spray paint on fabric, 94 by 97 inches. Collection Prince Franz von Bayern. Photo courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery.

Alexis Smith is often less interesting than her source material, still too seldom credited. Having started with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* years ago, she's come back to doing movies, here the tasty, foreign *Beauty and the Beast* of Cocteau. He remains the better artificer. Jonathan Borofsky's good, but he needs more of a context than the Whitney gave him. He links improbables, Biko and the Ayatollah for example. I'm glad to see art school mentioned, and glad to see some quirky, personal work directly on the walls, in contrast to the dessicated LeWitt and Bochners here. Borofsky's counting—he is past 2,500,000—is a lunatic accessioning system, like Köchel listings but done by Mozart himself. Neither continuing to count nor stopping seem very interesting, which is a problem, and dreams may become as barren for Borofsky as recollection did for Wordsworth.

Gregory Gillespie's learned recapitulations attracted a steady throng. He is full of painterly concerns, but also, as in the show-stopper *Self-Portrait in Studio*, oddly fragmented for a seeming master. Kelly remains superb without being interesting. He does get more personal results from Lippincott Fab-



Joyce Kozloff installation: four ceramic pilasters, 1979 (each 8 feet by 8 inches, tiles and grout on plywood; courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery), flanking *Mad Russian Blanket* (left), 65 by 80 inches and *Longing* (right), 92 by 41 inches; collection Steven Jacobson. Both 1977, collage, lithographs and colored pencil.

ricators than anyone else; the Cor-Ten shield looks like his, not theirs. Elizabeth Murray's paintings are worked with lots of little adjustments. They show a funny kind of range, but sometimes get mannered around the edge. Craig Kauffman has a nice light touch, going in and out of space and reference, while staying solid.

Martin Puryear's *M. Bastion Bouleverse*, which passed almost unnoticed by the press, was strong. His sources and materials are felt as special, as more than fodder for the art maw. He's good in the open, or, as here, on a high wall. The piece looked like a huge, strangely populated corral. Where the fence opened at the floor the posts were wrapped with soft tanned deerskin. Form, rendered as that which bulged, acted against line, that which enclosed. Care was given to the small parts, so they were specific little sculptures. Each had a particular shape, and each a spatial quality of tightness or dispersal, mimicking the actions of the enclosure. Camp could be struck quickly, the work packed and carried off.

The Deborah Butterfield horses were the most popular things in the show. Her work has gotten messier. The sculptures are like horses in trees, a strange sight. The pieces are better than real horses because you can go up to them without being scared. Her horses are nicely observed, in contrast to Rothenberg's, which seem ill-used. Main complaint: the sticks look somewhat clever and applied rather than real and indwelling. I would like to see Butterfield's horses with Nancy Graves's camels, Luis Jimenez' wild Western creatures, and Ann Arnold's barnyard animals. Another time.

Kenneth Price's ceramics do a lot in an unassuming way. The pieces appear slowly assembled. The stand in *Town Unit 2* works as a sculpture, a sideboard and a base. The cups, bowls, plates and plaques suggest Mexican folk art, but the throwing and glazing say otherwise. Robert Graham's figures are more and more classical, suggesting Roman fragments or Brancusis. His modeling of bodies at this scale is fine, but he still has some problems around the head. By incorporating the cups, sprues and risers from casting, by using real cloth, and by painting the bronze—it's stuff after all—he recovers a little of the magic he used to get from context.

The George Trakas didn't work, but he tried. Someone has to deal with the subways and the legacy of the el. He got the steel put together okay, but the wood and the glass and the scale were off. The Michael Singer was poetic and oddly reminiscent of some welded sculpture from the '60s. It suggested waves, wave action, wind. His concerns seem to come across better outside. The pegging was necessary but kind of precious.

The Alice Aycock was carelessly thought, badly nailed, badly puttied. Painting it might help. Surls's stick with fins was a nice invention a couple of years ago; turning it into a tornado or a bird is just dull. The Westermanns were so-so. His craftsmanship is as strange as ever, like grown-up shop. The works are homespun, crackerjack and very solid.

Tom Armstrong concluded his preface, "In its organization and format, basically the same as the first Biennial 47 years ago, it is a model for future Biennials." I hope not. I hope instead the Whitney becomes less corporate, less comfortable, more adventuresome, more difficult. The Biennial should howl, not purr. □