

Review of Exhibitions



Partial view of Judy Pfaff's *Deepwater*, 1980, installed at Holly Solomon. Materials include wire, plastic, paint, wood, mylar, mirrors and contact paper.

NEW YORK

Judy Pfaff at Holly Solomon

Over the past six years reviewers have labeled Judy Pfaff's work "nervous," "quirky," "kooky," "loony," "exuberant," "rambunctious," "rowdy" and "zany." These words are accurate about appearance, but inaccurate about consequence or importance—like describing roiling clouds but then not preparing for a storm. Most artists know the work, have a strong opinion about it and wish to push it from their domain because they don't like its im-

plications for their now conservative praxis. Pfaff has acutely, if playfully, undercut the still-felt separations between painting and sculpture, and between gallery art and theater. These issues are old, but her work is fresh: long on risk, reference, and energy—foci around which galleries are organizing and critics taking positions.

Her recent *Deepwater* was a room-size installation loaded with unexpected and inventive groupings. Clumped masses of lines—predominantly reed, wire and plastic tube—hung from the ceiling to the floor and sprouted off the painted and shape-bedecked walls. The installation was somewhat frontal: one looked back

through it as in old public aquariums, rather than around it as in the aimless cruising of snorkeling. Almost everything put into the space was painted. Pfaff uses colors currently fashionable in facetious designer clothing, in new wave and light-emitting work, shifting from pastels at the front to full-bodied hues in the back. Her colors are more garish than pretty, with an acid bite. Besides keying up the space, the paint helped establish a "waterline." The water theme was felicitous because the imagined fluid helped sustain her skeletonless line structures.

Pfaff has riffed Constructivism and collage to invent finally a sculpture that is Abstract Expressionist in appear-

ance. Fifties sculpture was largely unable to develop a rapid, personal facture to match that of painting. (If only they had had hot glue guns.) Pfaff has that quick facture: her work is loaded with thousands of snap decisions and details, and she makes ample use of the abstract painter's vocabulary of erasure and gesture. But she sometimes lacks patience. Her work is an approximation: improvised, edited and installed, not tinkered with and tuned. If something's wrong, she'll get it right next time. It's street-radio loud. Alan Saret's work, though structurally similar, has the distant assurance of a man telling his beads.

Pfaff's pieces suggest animation. In

her earlier figures the motion was jerky, punk/mechano; now it swirls—like a dervish or a maelstrom. Before, she cut and spliced her predominantly linear sculptures together; now she twists and wraps them. She still argues with her materials, beats them up. Much of the early work was both disposable and, after exhibition, disposed of, though bits were recycled or, more recently, sold.

Her work assaults several contemporary sculptural tenets. Though generally upright, Pfaff's pieces are rarely freestanding in a conventional sense: many of her figures are made of light materials and given lead feet to keep them up; most of the three-dimensional elements in *Deepwater* hung from the ceiling or wall. She appears to think that since parts can't be seen separately in her teeming sea, it isn't always necessary for them to work individually. But the show was nonetheless divided into eight independently salable units, which she'll alter and adjust on reinstallation.

Her strategy is not without its costs: when you do manage to isolate certain pieces they can look naive, even trivial. Her two-dimensional pizzazz can mask a three-dimensional uncertainty; the constant high volume sometimes militates against either subtle or resonant effects. Her sculpture is New York seen from on foot, hassling you with more incident than you can take in at once. It ends up blurring, like a roaring heat wave, or a shimmering sea bottom. —Wade Saunders

Italo Scanga at Koibart

In past years Italo Scanga has worked at reclaiming, literally and metaphorically, the popular religious imagery and other artifacts that evoke his native culture (he was born in Calabria but lives now in San Diego). When he uses cheap devotional prints, photographs and plaster statues of Holy Figures as the focal of his collages and enamel diages, they look respectfully ravaged, as if as though the artist were expressing nostalgia for a passing culture and warring skillfully through religious iconography of abuse. The more personal side of his work lies in the ambivalent acknowledgment of the sanctifying theme overlaid on him by his native background and modernist allegiances.

His new works again take up the theme of cultural tension and crisis, but with fewer explicitly autobiographical overtones. The *Plato Famine*, a set of ten oil paintings with collage elements, consists of dark brown, leathered-out backgrounds overlaid with sketchy landscape motifs and floating spunk-like shapes. Reed to the surfaces of the ten panels are heights of twisted vine, loam, and other age-worn remnants of peasant agriculture (as well as their pollinators). The quasi-archaeological references and serial format suggest the unfolding of a history, as if one were witness to the flustered personal account of a survivor



David Reed: #125, 1978, acrylic on canvas, two panels, 27 by 44 inches (each) at the Clocktower



Italo Scanga: *Fear of Fire*, 1960, wood, wax, oil, 72 by 27 by 16 inches, at Koibart

but the survivor is heartless. The visions are littered with, surreal in their scalar dimensions and spatial irrationality, like variations on the bad dream of a hungry man.

The mixed-medium sculptures in the exhibition revolve even more explicitly around the theme of fear. A representative piece consists of thin limbs assembled in the form of a male figure, erected on a wood base and energetically splashed with bright colors—as though to suggest a kind of primitive

Neolithic self-decoration. Over its head the figure holds the symbol of its bar-fouler fear. A variety of faces is presented, ranging from the universally left (*Fear of Earthquake*, *Fear of War*, *Fear of Being Trapped*) to those more particular to citizens of the modern age: *Fear of Drinking*, *Fear of Buying a House*, *Fear of the Metric System*. The slapdash marvel of style, as well as the inclusion in some pieces of toy-like objects, further enriches the sculptures by establishing an association be-

tween childhood and the genesis of fear. Indeed, the Scanga's previous work, these pieces in part address the psychic tensions borne by memory and carried with full immediacy into the present. This concern is supplemented by the enigmatic, proto-religious aspect: the raised arm gesture and rigidity of the figures in many of these pieces give them a strong exuberance, as well as a firm air suggesting the stylized poses found in tribal art. Like celebrants in a rite of catharsis, or some apocryphal gods, these figures seem ready to carry our prayers along, to ally the anxieties produced by collective uncertainties and private lettings. —Job Kwah

David Reed at the Clocktower

In a statement accompanying the show of 14 paintings made between 1974 and 1980, Reed explains that he considers them "studio" work: none of the canvases have appeared in one-man shows before, and all of them the artist has kept for himself as a record of transitional phases in his work. He points out also that he finds himself "caught" in three webs of ideas: Malevich's notion of "non-objective" feelings; the issue of invention in painting, especially as it challenges peripheral vision and the perceptual effects of the brain's division of space between left and right hemispheres as it processes spatial and linear information.

Though the paintings are of uneven quality, they do bear out Reed's increasing concentration on these concerns as he moves from a Minimalist yet painterly format, based on the wide black brushstroke in oil moving across a thick white ground, to a vision still centered on the brushstroke but reaching now toward greater ambiguity. The milestone year appears to have been 1976, when Reed began to experiment with shifts of scale, and to exchange oil for acrylic. Although his paintings he did between 1977 and 79 often fail, they nevertheless provide a chronicle of the conflict between, on the one hand, Reed's fidelity to the ideas which inform his painting and, on the other, his painter's instinct and judgment.

#205, a fine, obviously transitional work from 1976, consists of a canvas, nearly 18 feet long and 8 inches wide. On its thick base-white oil surface are four lateral brushstrokes spaced at regular intervals and moving from left to right in gradations of black to gray. Whereas Reed presented horizontal bands of strokes often in contiguous panels in his earlier paintings, the scale of #205 permits him to focus much more specifically on his project of exploring the limits of personal vision. Another beautiful painting, #174, also from 1976 but done in acrylic, consists of a long green panel joined at the right to a white panel with two black brushstrokes—the whole extending elegantly across nearly 14 feet of wall. As the eye moves from side to side