

De Staebler was a student of Voukos. His earlier pieces, more abstract though very organic looking, were clearly demonstrations of technique. Although technique certainly remains the artist's major subject, he succeeds here in bringing to it an allusive quality of fantasy as well.

—Knut Stiles

OAKLAND

Michael Todd at the Oakland Museum

In the ten years he has made sculpture on the West Coast, Michael Todd has exchanged a jaunty, axial geometry for an open calligraphic format, and has introduced mangled material and foundry spill into his vocabulary of plates and pipes. He developed his earlier work in the round; the recent pieces are more frontal. He has retained his insistent references to the gestural marking exemplified in Zen painting.

Todd often uses circles of rolled linear material to order and stabilize his compositions. He sizes the circles in advance and constructs the sculptures within them. The smallest pieces are the simplest. When his scale increases, he needs more and more bits to inflect the space enclosed. Thus his large sculptures tend toward the epic. They are rich and varied, and also, at times, creaky and overworked.

Todd has been somewhat stymied, as others before him, by the difficulty of translating painting idiom and technique into welded sculpture. Such sculpture is more akin to architecture than to painting, a medium far fleetier of syntax. A brush can both shape and place a stroke, while the analogous operations in sculpture are quite separate. Gravity is a conceptual, not a physical issue in painting, but a sculpture needs to be engineered to stand. Sculpture must be densely, even ploddingly argued in the round. Because steel is obdurate, hard to inflect, the clear personal marks possible with ink, clay or plaster are not easily achieved.

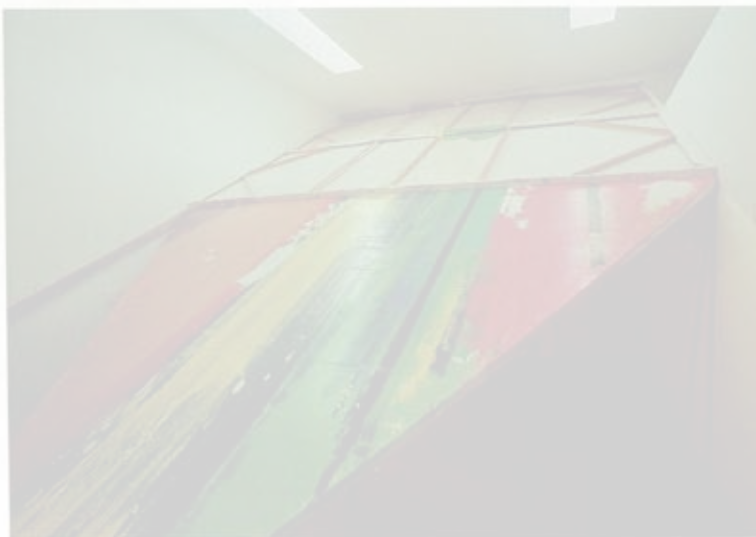
In his works seen at the Oakland Museum this summer, at Gallery Paule Anglim in San Francisco, and at the Casat Gallery in La Jolla [to Nov. 4], Todd evades many of these sculpture-as-painting dilemmas by collapsing the space of his pieces and hanging them on the wall. The wall gives him the ordering reference he has previously injected into his work with axes and circles. His frontality is made plausible. The sculptures are simultaneously eye-level and small. By working with ¼-inch rod, Todd can adjust his framing edge as the piece progresses, thus making personal marks. Under his touch steel becomes sensuous, velvety. The sculpture is self-supporting on the wall, so masses can be placed anywhere and the work assembled quickly, even gesturally. He lights the sculptures sharply, projecting



James Weeks: *Children Listening to Music—2nd Version, 1977*, acrylic on canvas, 68½ by 95½ inches; at the Oakland Museum.



Stephen de Staebler: three pots, all of fired clay, *4-Leg Vessel*, 19 by 27½ inches, *Cauldron*, 22 by 24 inches, *4-Bag Vessel*, 20½ by 22 inches; at Willis.



Richard Jackson: *Untitled, 1978*, acrylic on canvas, installed in a room 16 by 26¾ by 19 feet; at Felsen.

ing them back onto the wall. The shadows provide a tonal counterpoint and a two-dimensional rendering of the form.

These pieces are strong, un-

hedged and somehow puckish. He works two pie-shaped spaces against each other in *Kakebana VI*. The left space is all perimeter, the right all center. The curved plays

against the straight, the flat against the skew. The left dawdles while the right jangles. The halves reflect and invert one another, and so cleave together. In *Kakebana III* two pairs of plates double the closing of the arc, while a little cube mocks a kink in it. The mass is set high, yet seems weightless. *Kakebana* are traditional Japanese arrangements of flowers and foliage hung on the wall. In the floral displays, as in the sculpture, the seemingly casual particulars symbolically connect and refer to a pervasive natural order.

—Wade Saunders

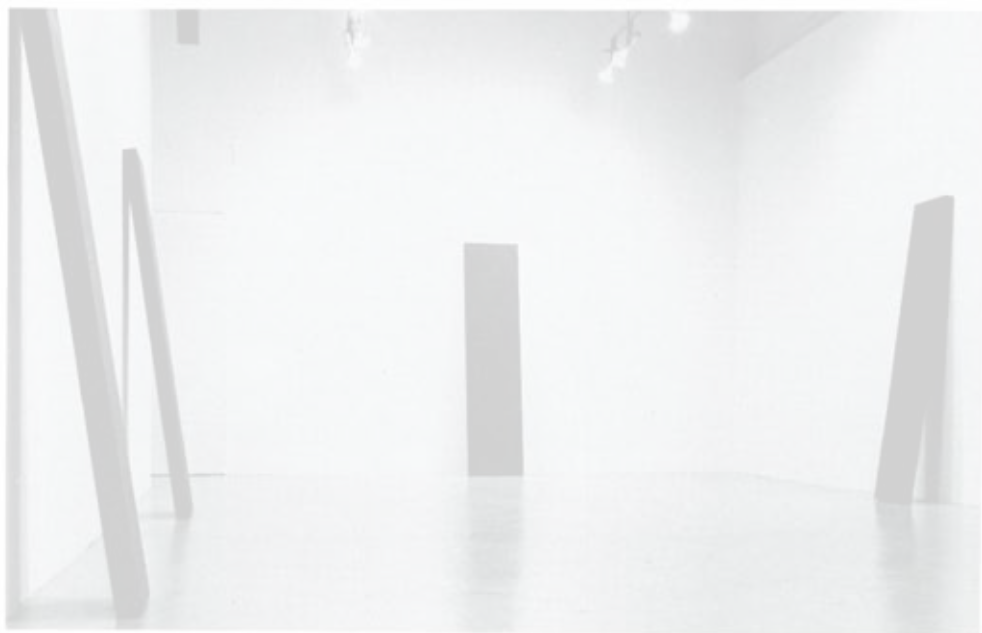
James Weeks at the Oakland Museum

James Weeks' 30-year retrospective came to Oakland after its first showing last spring at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, where the artist now teaches. He moved to the Boston area in 1970, having been regarded until then as a California artist. Bold portraits of jazz musicians and bright still-lives in clashing color schemes have now given way to serene park-like landscapes and classical chamber musicians in carefully balanced poses. The colors have become progressively more muted; one is tempted to assume that color is an equivalent for music in the artist's mind, and that the change reflects a change in his musical taste as well as a change of place.

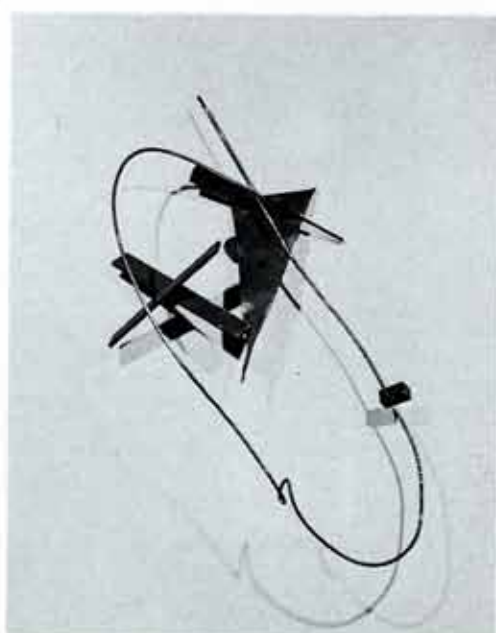
The factor which allies the early and late paintings is the artist's mastery of monumental projection. All important details can be seen perfectly from 50 feet away, and indeed, close inspection reveals that there is nothing to be gained by closeness. The composition which partially accounts for this quality, depends typically on diagonals which lean steeply when toward vertical, and rise only to modest inclines in the horizontal. The resultant structure suggests modular projections which would have been derived from much larger rectangles than the actual paintings.

Another technique which persists throughout his career is that of emphasizing objects by painting the space surrounding them a brighter color so that they stand out almost like a stencil in front of the scene. In an early still-life this negative or background space is more evident than the rubber tree leaves that it surrounds; in a middle-period portrait the bright lavender triangle between the subject's legs is more evident than the somber tonalities of the subject himself; and in recent landscapes the sky is often repainted a light blue, much brighter and more dramatic than the green and gray hues of the landscape. This device brings the imagery strongly toward the picture plane and makes the picture seem quite abstract.

The early and middle-period paintings are clearly related to such artists as Diebenkorn, Park and Bischoff, and critics often tend to bicker about whose work was derived from whose.



John McCracken: Untitled works, 1978, plywood, resin and acrylic, each ca. 94 by 20 by 3 inches; at Meghan Williams.



Michael Todd: *Kakebana III*, 1978, welded steel, 43 by 26 by 17 inches; at the Oakland Museum; review p. 159.

ness. What has come of it already is interesting enough. (I wish everybody could see his films.) What comes of it in the future will bear watching.
—Peter Schjeldahl

John McCracken at Meghan Williams

In the intense stylistic competition of the '60s, John McCracken's early "plank" works were a solid score. They did what many were trying to do—form a more perfect union of painting and sculpture—with Minimalist directness and maximum flash. Stylistically, their combination of formality (crisp geometric shape) and informality (they leaned against the wall) seemed definitive, and the regional ("L.A.-Look") touch of their sleek, "surfboard" resin finish prevented blandness, gave them a sassy personality. In a time that valued the superficial all-wisdom of hipness above most other things, McCracken was very hip indeed. Nor do I think the simpler planks, at least, suffer much from being dated. The one from 1966-'67 at the Los Angeles County Museum looks as sharp and insolent as ever, a kind of magnetized icon of a cultural moment confidently awaiting reappraisal.

It's not easy, however, to put a positive construction on the fact that in 1978 McCracken is still making plank-works. His recent show featured the latest of many more or less unsuccessful variations on his original brainstorm. This one is a near-module of plywood covered with roughly brushed pigmented resin covered, in turn, with a layer of matte charcoal-gray acrylic. There were nine units, varying very slightly in size (all in the vicinity of 94 by 20 by 3 inches) and somewhat more conspicuously in the degree to which the

shiny underlying resin peeks through the suave blackish overcoat, and in the color of the resin. The amount of exposure is generally slight, the color generally hot and/or acidic. Despite their vernacular leaning state, these works—which actually seem more box than plank—have a brooding, menhir-like presence, portentous in a simple-minded kind of way. How the surface fuss is supposed to relate to the heavy (but literally hollow) massiveness defeats my imaginative powers. The fantastical possibility of a sort of fire-within illusion is contradicted by the materiality of the brush-marks, and the painterly dynamic is far too exquisite to hold its own against the assertiveness of the "support." The works seem moody in their irresolution, at once truculent and touchy.

One may conclude, I think, that McCracken believes in the inherent magic of his plank-like form, as if it were an abstract Galatea. It wouldn't be the first time. How often has one seen an inspired image come back in refurbished form season after season, a little tamer and more arbitrary, a little farther removed from its original inspiration, each time? The fetishizing of the successful object/image is an abiding malady in late-modern art. Performed with sufficient irony, as by Johns or Oldenburg, say, it can yield delight. But I detect no irony in McCracken. His more impulsive sensibility badly needs something fresh to engage it.
—Peter Schjeldahl

PARIS

Picasso Donation at the Louvre

Picasso's donation to the Louvre of 51 paintings from his personal collec-

tion of other artists' work is, on the whole, dazzling. Matisse's *Basket of Oranges* is testament to the bond of painting uniting two now-mythic figures, while a Cubist Braque recalls a moment when discovery was mutual. Picasso's Mirós are both early and ripe; a witty Spanish dancer wiggles her pearls while a self-portrait reveals an anxiety which Picasso's midnight minotaurs well comprehend.

It is fun to see what Picasso liked. His Cézannes attest to veneration of a divergent sensibility, and his delight in artistic deception did not deter him from appreciating the naive work of Rousseau. His Degas monotypes however, show not dancers lifting legs to the bar but bordello ladies who suggest his own late erotic portraits with their tinge of mockery. The Renoir nudes, among our frankest statements of overripe appetite, likewise point to attitudes shared by collector and collected.

Picasso seemed to like what was like him. But then it is hard not to look for the presence of Picasso in his gift to the French people of great works by others. One is tempted to look through his eyes, for the shifts in his taste find their parallels in the evolution of his own work.

However, many of the works accepted as originals by Picasso are strange and disputed. Two Corots and a speckly Gauguin bear question marks in the catalogue, as does a dusky slab of mutton ascribed to Chardin. And there are some who would sniff at his Courbet, intuiting the hand of a pupil. Nonetheless, 95 years before Picasso's own work breaches the Louvre, his entire personal collection defiantly enters. It will remain there, until, in all likelihood, it is transferred to the new Picasso museum currently under construction in the Marais district. The Louvre is particularly joyful about the Matisse, Cézanne and Rousseau.

Given to the nation by his widow Jacqueline and son Paolo, with permission of all the heirs, the donation fulfills Picasso's own wish. In its mixture of outright masterpieces and more questionable works, this collection is somehow touching—one feels Picasso's willfulness, the power of his choice. Not to be bowed to like idols, many of these canvases were originally propped against studio easels and walls. For Picasso, paintings could never be furnishings. When he squabbled with one of his artist-friends, he often removed that person's pictures from sight, only to return them mysteriously when the rupture healed. Picasso's paintings attested to friendships as well as to veneration, and the Matisse were among the joys of his collection. Trying to recover his beloved *Basket of Oranges* from his dealer, Matisse cried when he realized that Picasso had bought it. The latter, realizing the glory of his purchase, gave it the place of honor at the foot of his stairway.
—Ethel Joyce Hammer

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