

Art

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Does 'Advanced' Art Have 'Content'?
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The Changing Gallery Scene: Return of the Co-Op
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'Like Catching an Opera Diva Singing in Her Kitchen'
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See the article in its original context from September 17, 1972, Section D, Page 23

As the New York art world enters its second straight season without even the pretense of a dominant new art movement, the closest thing to a “trend” in sight may be less esthetic than social and economic—involving, among other things, the return to respectability of the co-op gallery. The co-op, in which members share expenses and duties, flourished briefly in the semi-underground 10th Street scene of the 1950's, then lost out to the new big time entrepreneurial galleries of the sixties with their well groomed stables of art stars. A sixties artist who had to pay for his own show was judged an embarrassment to his family and friends.

This is changing. Since the parade of new art began careening off in every conceivable direction at once, the entrepreneurial gallery has lost its status as vanguard bandwagon. More and more, such galleries either have become the refuge of one or another languishing faction or have started hedging their bets; either way, their cachet has diminished. A natural beneficiary of this leveling process is the co-op. As the rationale of movement and gallery politics is weakened by events, the alternative, for young artists, of a friendly SoHo setting where their work can appear in company of their own choosing and be judged on its own merits becomes increasingly attractive—worth, perhaps, a few hundred bucks. As for the art audience, what can it do but follow where the artists lead?

Granted, this thesis may be premature. The art-world prejudice against co-ops as havens for losers is deeply engrained, and even with a quantum leap in their number this fall—including an all-women showplace, on Wooster Street, and a rather glossy operation called West Broadway—they are still few and unproven. But their underlying logic, in the present confused situation, seems quite irresistible on the face of it. The currently atomized state of taste will be worked out, slowly, in artists' studios, and nothing is closer to the studio than the co-op gallery.

55 Mercer is both the address and the name of what, pending a look at the new entrants, is the very model of a working, up-to-date co-op. A three-year-old, com modious, comfortably shabby loft in SoHo, 55 Mercer is catholic, serious and rife with good vibrations. I am unfamiliar with the work of most of its many members, but its two season-opening shows bode well. Simultaneous debuts by two young artists—sculptor Rosemary Wright and painter Janet Ailing—these shows are auspicious at once in themselves and as signs of the kind of in-process energy that gives the co-op its artistic reason for being. Unfortunately both shows are set to close later this week.

Rosemary Wright's sculptures — three ensembles of cardboard or paper modules and one of square, fired-clay plates—are what might be called Second-Generation Minimal in persuasion. They display an interest in off-beat materials and in modular, mathematically derived structures that is characteristic of much art of the last few years. But they also possess a relaxed and non-didactic quality, a friendliness to the eye, that marks them as very much of the present moment. And, apart from stylistic considerations, a couple of them are really splendid.

Most impressive is a flamboyant group of 42 big tetrahedron-like modules, entitled “Range,” that is about three feet high and occupies about 600 square feet of floor. The modules comprise two right-triangular cardboard slabs apiece, hinged and propped tent-fashion, and are placed in tight, side-by-side rows that alternate in direction. Long rectangular slots, pitched at an angle, have been carved in each; the angle changes progressively from module to module. The progression is nearly impossible to “read,” however, for its sequence leapfrogs back and forth over intervening rows. If this sounds confusing, that's because it is, but a terrific visual complexity, combined with a sense of order, seems to be precisely what “Range” is about.

A similar dialectic governs “Wind/Tide/Current,” a low lying arrangement of 36 wedge-shaped paper structures painted with silver stripes. The angles of the stripes obey the same tricky logic as the slots in “Range,” though here the complexity resolves itself in a kind of lyrical feeling reinforced by the title. It would be going a bit far to suggest that Wright's wedges with their silver striations resemble incoming waves played upon by wind and sun; their presence is too strict and geometrical for that. But they do represent a lovely example of an austere conception infused, without being vitiated, by a surprisingly personal and poetic sensibility.

What is surprising about Janet Alling's beautiful oil paintings of plants is not their possession of the personal and the poetic—one might expect as much—but their power. Working somewhat within the photograph-like conventions of much new realist art, but with a painterly freedom counter to those conventions, Alling renders her lush coleuses, gloxinias and jade plants super-close up, in outsized scale, with a wonderful intensity both of attention to visual fact and involvement in the act of painting. That intensity results in an art which, though obviously open to many influences, is utterly free of clichés. And, as I said, it is beautiful.

A lot of recent representational art has been corny or insipid, but a number of artists, among whom I would now include Alling, really do appear to be advancing realist painting in an important way. Almost brutal in its scale manipulations and its assertions of detail, but full of acidity and sweetness of personality, work like Alling's reintroduces us to the visible world with a bang. Such work, its newness substantive rather than merely technical, is of

exactly the kind least likely to find a place in the now-enervated “vanguard” galleries; it's too strong for them. And until a new revolution in taste arrives to focus the situation, one might well expect that permissive laboratories of style like the downtown co ops will be where it—what ever “it” proves to be—is at.