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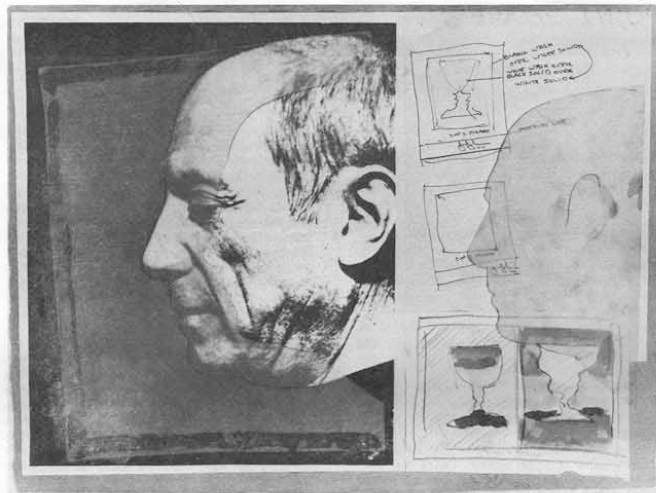
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Three Generations of Collage

Los Angeles *Louise Lewis*
Collage in its many guises is the theme of *Three Generations: Studies in Collage* at the Margo Leavin Gallery. Over seventy artists and 100 works provide a healthy indication that collage, like painting, sculpture, prints, photography and all other art media, virtually defies definition in the twentieth century's "anything goes" attitude. In this exhibition there are collages for the purists and not-so-purists, for painters and sculptors, for formalists and expressionists, for aficionados of small scale works and of large scale works, for colorists and for "linearists." Some of the artists included have established much of their reputation in collage work; others have used it only experimentally. In all of this there is a somewhat disordered feeling complicated by a lack of clean definition of "generation" — the works span fifty years, include some European, but mostly American artists (with a sizable chunk from southern California), and represent numerous styles: surrealism, dada, abstract expressionism, post-AE, environmental, conceptual, process, performance, and so on. Most obviously, no particular limitations are set on the term collage, and with the range of interpretations shown, it is only natural that one wonders what collage really means.

Strictly speaking, collage is a derivation of the French "coller," to glue; for the purists, gluing was limited to working with flat, two-dimensional materials, usually paper, both for the support and for the attached portions. But collage, from its initiation into High Art by Picasso as early as 1908, already contained a dual nature that became progressively more evident in succeeding years. In his *Still Life with Chair Caning* Picasso incorporated into a painting a piece of wallpaper patterned to look like chair caning. The *papier colle* served to challenge traditional concepts of the reality of space and picture planes, and by its ever so slight relief was breaking from the



JASPER JOHNS: SKETCH FOR CUP 2 PICASSO/CUPS 4 PICASSO, 1971-72, collage and watercolor, 15 1/2" x 20 1/4", at the Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

traditionally accepted flatness of the painting surface. But the paper was also a form of found object and therein provided yet another take-off point on the proverbial question of the reality of the artwork — the paper was a real piece of wallpaper, not illusionistically painted, but it was incorporated within a traditional painting framework. Picasso saw the logical implications of attaching paper to the painting surface and by 1914 extended the concept of dual realities of form and space suggested by collage and found objects in his first assemblage, *A Glass of Absinthe*. Thus, in 1914 collage was already showing itself open to a wide interpretation, later manifested in assemblage and in a liberal "anything-that's-glued-is-collage" context.

Picasso is notably absent from this exhibition, as are several other major collagists, but a few Europeans whose pioneering work in collage also helped set the stage of the post-World War II assemblagists in the United States are included. Duchamp, Ernst and Arp are tokenly represented with one work each; Schwitters is better represented with four of his small *merz* collages of neatly arranged paper debris from everyday life — theater tickets, news clippings, film boxes, and so on.

The majority of the works at the Margo Leavin date from the early 1950s and include a sizable selection by the pop contingent. Johns, Rivers, Dine, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg and Wesselmann are all here; Rauschenberg is disappointingly represented by two standard photostickscrap-tape-pencil statements from the sixties, but not by one of his combines (his term for the collage-assemblage work), nor by one of his later *Pages and Fuses* series. Warhol's entry is the most literal contemporary interpretation of collage. *Banana Paste-Up* is exactly that, with a photographic negative pasted on copy ready for offset reproduction. Nauman's *Bad Light* has marked similarities to Warhol in presentation, but supposedly distinguishes itself by coming from conceptual rather than pop esthetics.

The whole crop of pace-setting assemblagists of the fifties and sixties offers small and predictable works — Kienholz, Herms, Conner and Samaras are all here. Cornell, represented by both pure collage and assemblage, provides a neat indication of the thin line between *papier colle* and early assemblage.

The juiciest collages in the show come from the abstract expressionist group, whose members prefer to explore the painterly and more purist applications of collage. Most of the works are intimate and small scale studies, but lose none of the exuberance and expressive qualities of the artists' better-known large canvases. Among this group are Kline, de Kooning, Reinhardt, Leslie and Vicente. The exhibition draws its greatest strength from a good selection of collages, both large and small, by Motherwell, who more than the others pushed the possibilities of early cubist collage into an expressionist painting context.

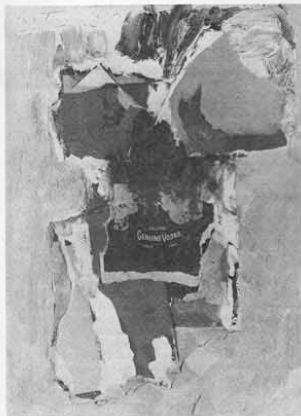
There are some surprises in the show — a virtually conceptualist collage by Joseph Stella, better known for his futurist leanings; two small high relief metal collages by Chamberlain that are every bit as gutsy as his scrap metal sculptures; a

process-conceptual work by Rosenquist, with the paper burned out, cut out, drawn and glued upon; and an extremely erotic and sadistic collage by Dine. The most stunning example in the show is a small collage study by Diebenkorn executed in 1959 from torn and rearranged scraps of painted canvas. The finished result, for all intents and purposes, is a miniature *Ocean Park*, a series which he did not begin until nearly ten years later.

Although the show is uneven in its "e pluribus unum" selection of artists and in a sometimes indiscriminate selection of works, it is nevertheless a large undertaking and does provide a stimulating cross section of the versatility collage has enjoyed in artists' hands. While one might question the interpretation of collage in some of the works and might further sense confusion by inclusion of formalist, expressionist, painterly, sculptural, American, European, pre- and post-World War II generation works, there is one common trait necessary and appealing to all camps, and that is the tactile nature of the surface — that sensual teaser, whether it be a barely visible tissue overlay in Moses' exquisite miniature sketch, or Arnoldi's latex and string painting, or Conner's visceral and morbid assemblage of old nylons and jewelry. The show provides an orgy of tactile surfaces which elicit an enormous range of sensations. This aspect of the exhibition is so overwhelming that no one really cares to quibble about whether the traditional definition of collage should stick. □



TOM WESSELMANN: UNTITLED, 1964, mixed media collage/assemblage on board, 9" x 10" x 2", at the Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.



ROBERT MOTHERWELL: UNTITLED, 1957, collage, 16" x 12", at the Margo Leavin Gallery.



GARY HALL: UNTITLED (detail), 1977, acrylic, gesso and graphite on canvas, 18" x 85", at Thomas Lewallen Gallery, Santa Monica.

Los Angeles painter Gary Hall makes a strong debut in a show of new works from his *Circus and Confrontation* series. The *Circus* pieces are drawings on gessoed canvas, usually painted over with white acrylic. Fleeting images of horses, circus tents and trapeze artists are traces of activity — referential remnants on vast white grounds. Subject matter is not apparent in the more painterly *Confrontation* series. Bold shapes of black and deep green allude to architectural space and play off flames of brick red. Hall often uses an exaggerated horizontal format, achieving a dynamic flow through angled shapes and suggested line. Tough color and rather brittle drawing lend an appealingly awkward flavor to this solid, well-composed work. (SM)