

Plagens, Peter. "William Leavitt, Eugenia Butler Gallery." *Artforum* (September 1970), p. 81-83.

## LOS ANGELES



Dieter Rot, *Staple Cheese, A Race*, 1970. Eugenia Butler Gallery.

**RICHARD SERRA FILMS, Ace Gallery; DIETER ROT, WILLIAM LEAVITT, Eugenia Butler Gallery; TOM EATHERTON, Pomona College Art Gallery; ED MOSES, Mizuno Gallery; JASPER JOHNS, Irving Blum Gallery; ROBERT COTTINGHAM, Molly Barnes Gallery; JOHN McLAUGHLIN, Félix Landau Gallery:**

Knowledge, the existentialists say, is engaged knowledge; our windows to the world, however theoretical, are specific, located points, and everything within our perceptual field, including perception itself, is *in situ*. When the psychological "set" involves art expectations, the absence of a separate, finished physical object directly increases the importance of the immediate environment — the closing of time, place, other people and operations. RICHARD SERRA's recent exhibition at Ace Gallery (comprised of a big piece similar to *Sawing* at PAM and several propped metal sculptures of a type previously and thoroughly covered in these pages) included the showing of four short films which, with one exception, were fine, but which, as a totality, shifted one's attention radically toward the situation. In Ace's big cube, the audience (leather-vested glint-eyed boys in cowboy shirts and aviator glasses and wan, bra-less *jeunes filles ennuyées*) climbed over Serra's great log piling and braced itself in the sawdusty heat while a succession of personnel struggled with a tiny, limpid-eyed projector. It must be endemically American, this bringing to bear of a great deal of *matériel* (people, machinery, things) on a flickering, short-duration set of images on the avail-

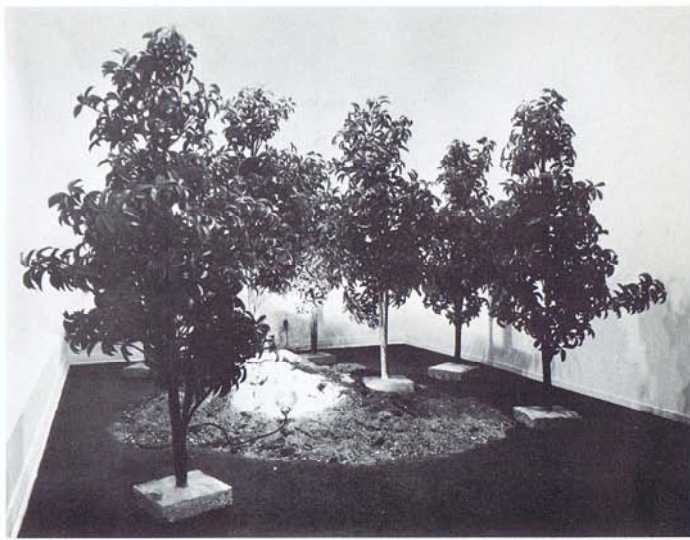
able wall. (They say our combat troops require the logistical support of three men for every one in action.)

The films were projected, it appeared, in a descending order of didactics. In the first, four hands (two Serra's) remove a pile of sawdust down to the last specks between thumb and forefinger and place it somewhere off-camera. The repetitive short swishes of the quick, efficient hands fall into rough cadence with the revolving sprockets: work = hand speed = rhythmic movement = dance = cycle = the process / materials of the film. Quite a nice movie, it lasted, I think, about four minutes. In the second, a bit shorter, Serra's right hand, thumb up, opens and closes, grabbing at several dozen lead scraps dropped from just above camera. The hand tires progressively; he misses maybe sixty percent of the objects. The same minor hypnosis as in the initial offering prevails, and the hand fits the screen the way the heads used to fit TV screens in *Dragnet*. In the third film, a pretty girl is seen through a stationary camera, from the shoulders up, pirouetting; as she turns, her axis shifts and one *feels* the shift of her feet. Like all the films, the time ratio is 1:1 and, speaking of Warhol, the movie is closely reminiscent of *Nancy Worthington Fish*, et al. The last picture, a *pièce de résistance*, is a process-play on *trompe l'oeil*: under voice-over directions from the cameraman, Serra traces the framing edge with a ruler ("Am I on it? Yeah? OK, a little more in. OK? Yeah. Lessee, that's twelve and twelve more . . ."). Although we see the boundary as a round-cor-

nered rectangle, Serra has measured off a trapezoid, and we can begin the questions: How did this happen? Why do we watch "in" the picture when the "action" flutters along the edge? Why does the "dead" spot in the film seem to be the very part where it comes to life (when the panel is moved and, for a moment, we see out the window to the street below)? If the first film is the best because it is the least contrived real "work" as movement, this last one follows closely; it is also the most conceptual, a specific debunking of universal geometry in which the concreteness of the world is transformed into pure idea, then, in the movie frame's failure to remain rectangular,

modified as art, re-cast in particular terms.

Beside quality, ideas also have character or flavor or style; Los Angeles "concept art" bears the same general relation to the New York version as did its Abstract Expressionism (Hassel Smith v. de Kooning), Pop art (Ed Ruscha v. Warhol) or Minimal (McCracken v. Morris). That is, it's comparatively slick, facile, pretty, light (as in "light verse") and requires a little more hardware. The concept itself is usually a bright idea predicated on one or two conundrums of real-nonreal and/or art-nonart, roughly comparable in gravity to the spy stories Graham Greene classifies as "entertainments" rather than novels.



William Leavitt, *untitled*, 1970. Eugenia Butler Gallery.

In Los Angeles, the main source of ideological entertainments is Eugenia Butler's gallery, which has, in exhibitions involving DIETER ROT and William Leavitt, devoted the last couple of months to environmental satire. Rot, a Swiss, filled three dozen suitcases of various forms and sizes with a thousand pounds of assorted cheeses (to the accompaniment of Thorstin Veblen spinning in his grave), sealed and dated the valises and let them sit in the gallery. When I saw the two rows, they were in various stages of decomposition, escorted by a pervading odor, a little puddled juice and a few wandering maggots. A sidecar work, *Cheese Sandwich*, consisting of several sectors of Camembert between two one-by-sixes, resided a few yards away. When opened, the suitcases presented several beautiful molds, esthetically in the same league as pebbled beaches, damp leaves and weathered barns, and the suitcases themselves, depending on what one brings to them, can pass as a deadpan, minimal-funk-pop sort of sculpture. But the real thrust is ideational and didactic, concerning the surroundings and intent of art, most of which is a very old saw: 1) does it have to be permanent to be art? 2) does it have to be valuable to be art? and 3) does it have to be innately pleasant to be art? The same questions are/were posed by artists from Géricault to Oppenheim to such an extent that

nobody would seriously propose that a definition of art which could stand up in court could be legislated by anybody without, eventually, including everything. Indeed, the prevailing philosophy is that *intention-as-art* is not only sufficient, but possibly redundant, which leaves us back where we started with a myriad grey-scale of quality problems. Ephemeral art is simply anti-museum art; valueless art is only anti-market art. The cheese piece did not confront one's esthetics directly enough. In fact, the smell itself, alone, tough, mysterious, would have made a better show.

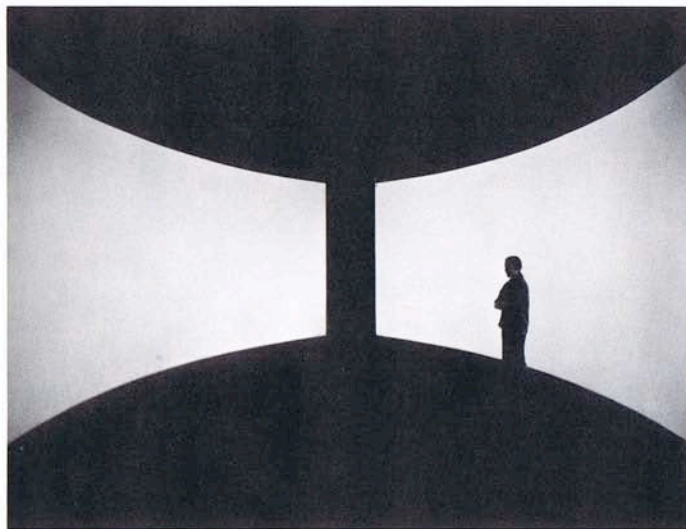
WILLIAM LEAVITT, by comparison, deals in niceties. In the front gallery is a clump of plastic foliage with fake rocks and nestled speakers transmitting the amplified babble of electrically gurgled water in a box at the side. In the rear is a dirt mound forested with cement-based plastic trees lighted by a yellow spotlight and cooled by a recorded wind. The paradoxes stack up this way: a (real) art gallery contains a bit of (unreal) "nature" composed of real and unreal materials and intended as (real) art. Of course, if the given earth is the basis for "real," then the gallery is unreal; if the gallery is real, the artwork, by contrast is real — plastic trees as real nature — and real "nature" is, coming full circle, unreal. What it comes down to is a lesson: the nature of an object is dependent on its context, the context dependent

on further context and so on into infinity. O.K. But the dichotomy is presented in an atmosphere of philosophical cuteness, without difficulty or profundity, as a simplistic, passive, intellectual funhouse.

Formalist environments, on the other hand, seem unburdened by literature and function with an almost automatic significance engendered by the purity of the piece. TOM EATHERTON's *Rise*, the last environmental work in a series commissioned by Hal Glicksman before he moved on to the Corcoran, is a case in point. By means of a small passageway, one enters a darkened oval room with its curved walls adumbrated by a bluish-white backlit CinemaScope-like "screen" of translucent cloth. The visual-kinetic illusion, which, besides a general and welcome peacefulness, seems to be the whole point of the piece, is that the floor rises at either end; when I walked toward the black "door" opposite the entrance, I had

the eerie sensation I was walking *in* the floor, up to my knees. The world in *Rise* is singular, with no extraneous objects and no outside sensations disturbing its purity. It's a good, tailored one-shot.

The problem of constructing an environment in more traditional formalist terms (that is, letting it look like "art" — drawing, painting, sculpture), without the conveniences of architectural purity or storekeeper allusionism, is a hard row to hoe and (if that's what he's about), ED MOSES has succeeded nicely. Moses is an underrated artist, admired most by a group of his more publicized peers; he's stuck to an uncompromised pictorialism, physical austerity, and a persistent reverence for the soul of Abstract Expressionism, while everyone else has gone their own mirror-finish way. (Moses was perfunctorily represented in the PAM's opening "West Coast" show, but his work, a drawing, was typically ambivalently displayed; Moses will appear in the index, but not on the cover.) The work at Mizuno is an alteration of the gallery itself utilizing both addition and subtraction. The inside ceiling is removed, allowing sunlight to slip through the planking and fall in diagonal striations to the floor. The gallery walls above the twelve-foot mark have been stripped down to the institutional green underpinning. On each wall Moses has constructed a large rectangular panel of two-by-fours and building board, and drawn on the surface of each with colored pencil grids and taped seams. A similar 8 by 20-foot slab lies in the middle of the floor, draped in raw duck cloth. And, in the hallway, there are rolls of canvas and plastic and, hung, one framed drawing. The piece is difficult to judge because I don't quite know whether to take it as expanded painting (which, from the chronology of Moses' work, it is), or an altered, impoverished room, which I have a hunch Moses thinks it is. Whatever, its attendant effects — the workshop atmosphere with the smell of lumber, canvas and white paint, the feeling of "closeness" to its container (the gallery) and the overall airiness of the piece — are supportive on a level deeper than easy decoration. What convinces me of its quality is its thorough ambivalence and balance; it is particular, yet environ-



Tom Eatherton, *Rise*, 1970. Pomona College Art Gallery.



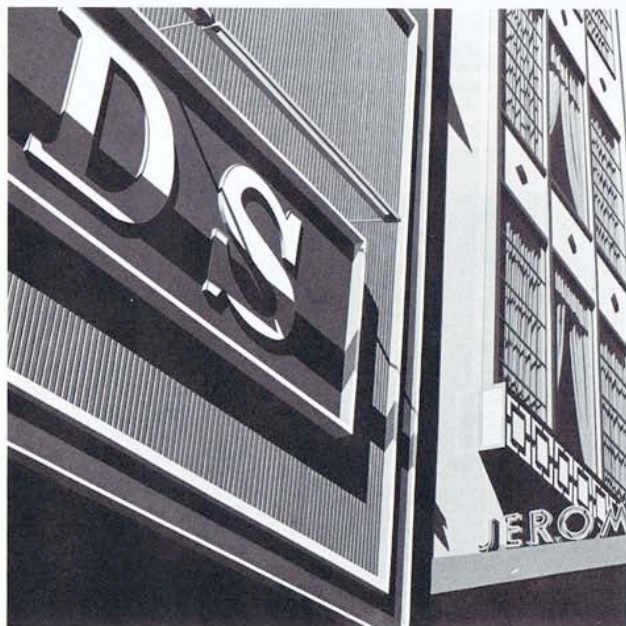
Installation view, Edward Moses exhibition, Mizuno Gallery, Los Angeles.

mental, handmade yet neutralized, painterly (a quality considered reactionary or cloying in current art), yet austere. Although, in the end, it is “balanced,” I can’t quite figure it all, which is reason enough to look again, which is reason enough for me, too, to admire it.

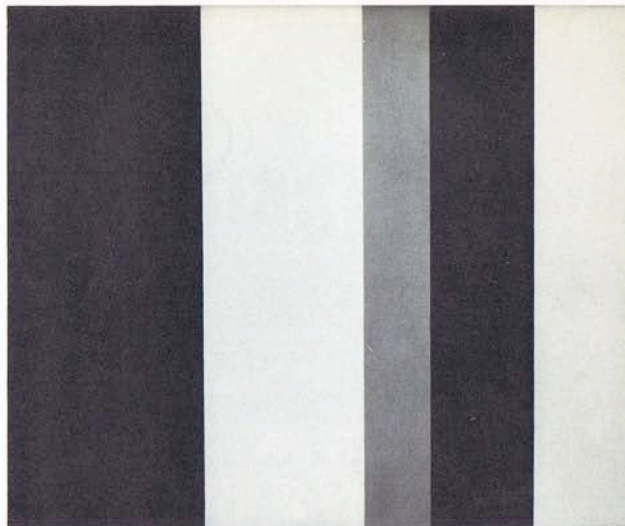
Moses’ show indicates a kind of stability and points out that the rapid turnover of styles is a two-way street. The short-range effect is that the parent art, barraged by progeny who have ironed out the bugs and hyped up the scale and intensity, dates quickly. The long-range effect is that, on return, the parent art looks much richer, tougher, more profound against the very backdrop of its turbine-powered children; there is a richness of imagery and technique, color and graphics, and, more or less, “meaning” unremembered before. Such is the case with JASPER JOHNS. If Johns is not, as the puff says, “the foremost lithographer of his time,” he is at least one of the most clever. The exhibition, a reprise of the images made famous — flags, coat hangers, targets, ale cans and numbers — is a veritable catalog of lithographic approaches, the touting of which does not diminish, but rather heightens the work. What Johns does best are kinds of “wedg-

ing”; he buries a foreground object in an activated background, he squeezes a certain-size mark into an elegantly proportioned surface, and he lays a wonderful scale of greys open to his controlled expressionist brushmark. There are two prints which seem to me to be unusually revealing of Johns’ conceptual-manual style. *The Critic Sees* depicts a pair of eyeglasses holding, in place of lenses, a pair of mouths (lips and teeth). In the path of the image (which is not one of Johns’ best), the story unfolds: the critic sees with his mouth, and Johns retorts with a picture, condescendingly literary, to which the critic can re-reply in words, renewing an absurd cycle. *No*, a large graphic (56” x 35”), is an acrobatic *tour de force* involving three separate greys, silver, and a lead *assemblage* word (“NO”) dangling from an illusionary wire, possessing an illusionary/real shadow.

While Johns plays upon the unavoidable dualism of pictorial and real elements, there is always (present) the pure illusionist alternative, using the world as a “source,” a handmaiden buttressing the picture with the aura of craft, the respectability of precision and the weight of tradition. Hardly any of us being beyond the awe of realist exercises,



Robert Cottingham, *DS, a/c*, 78 x 78”, 1970. Molly Barnes Gallery.



John McLaughlin untitled, oil and casein on panel, 1953. Felix Landau Gallery.

COTTINGHAM not unsurprisingly wins prizes for his thing. Cottingham’s seven oils, about five by six feet each, are encapsulations of close-up sign fragments, lifted via camera from the portals of nascently delapidating shops in the six-hundred block of downtown Broadway. Strangely, they’re all more alike than the same automobile in various models, and they seem more a cut-out series than most ‘Stellas. The content of each is the same, the store name lettering in neon, shadow-box, awning, etc., and enough background (well, not quite; everything is foreground) building detail to fill out the painting. Cottingham’s style lies in two areas (I attribute the X-based compositions to his viewing angle): flat paint application (doing it the hard way, in oils) and the choice of one-half-step pasty colors — salmon, beige, sea-green, etc.). On a chart, he’s tighter than Lowell Nesbitt, broader than Richard Estes, perhaps closer to Charles Sheeler than any contemporary.

The intended look is, I think, that Cottingham is using realist grist as a starter for complex architectural abstraction but, I’m afraid, it turns out the other way around; Cottingham, his layouts seeming so indifferent, is probably using a pardonable trace of formalism to prop up a realist workout. (Realism isn’t a vice; like anything else, it’s only a detriment when it’s done badly — Cottingham does it relatively well — or when

one pretends he’s really after something else — and that’s Cottingham’s fault.) Finally, there is a nostalgia exuding from Civic Center Broadway which just doesn’t go with that bright, clever treatment; the Miracle Mile would work better.

Perhaps plain abstract paint — a novel, a-illusionist — is simply, these days, an undernourished form; if it’s not completely universal to begin with, it’s a little dull. But when it works, it’s wonderful. That is the wall against which JOHN McLAUGHLIN, our seventy-year-old hyper-austere neoplastic master keeps butting his uncompromising head. My reaction to this newest exhibition of a dozen or so small oils, all seemingly containing the primaries with black, white and grey, is ambivalently intense. One of my first experiences in a painting really *dawning* on me (the blue, here, pulls the grey, here, over just enough so that the white . . .) was in the same gallery with the same artist, several years ago, under the erudite narration of a Hofmann student. McLaughlin’s work, rigidly honest, a delicate juggling of modesty and craft, still seems to me, in all its right-angled, pure-hued correctness, satisfying. On the other hand, I find McLaughlin niggardly; he will not give an ounce of lubrication (*à la* Bolotowsky) to his machinery of timelessness. The works demand, and get, respect. Love is another thing.

—PETER PLAGENS