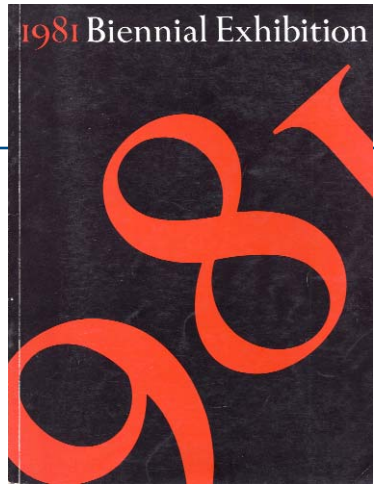


Russ Warren

PRESS CLIPPINGS

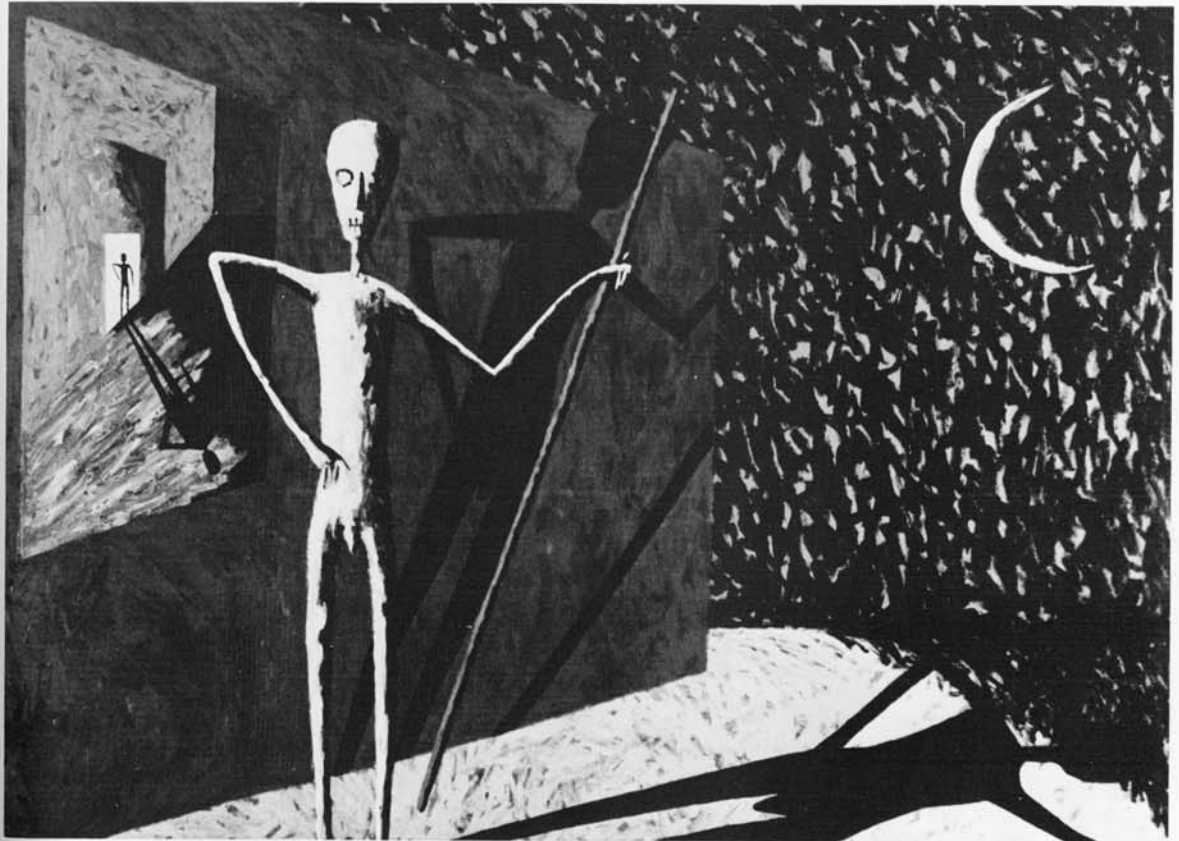


1981
Biennial
Exhibition

1981 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum
of American Art | 1981
p. 117.

Whitney Museum
of American Art

Russ Warren



Ella Noche, 1980

Ella Noche, 1980
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 66"
(121.9 x 167.6 cm)
Lent by the artist

The Triumph of Death, 1980
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60"
(121.9 x 152.4 cm)
Lent by the artist

**Paradise Lost/
Paradise Regained:
American Visions
of the New Decade**

La 41^a Biennale di Venezia 1984
United States Pavilion

Organized by
The New Museum of Contemporary Art,
New York City

**Paradise Lost/Paradise Regained:
American Visions of the New Decade | 1984**

La 41^a Biennale Di Venezia 1984, United States Pavilion
Organized by The New Museum of Contemporary Art,
New York, pp. 82–83

82

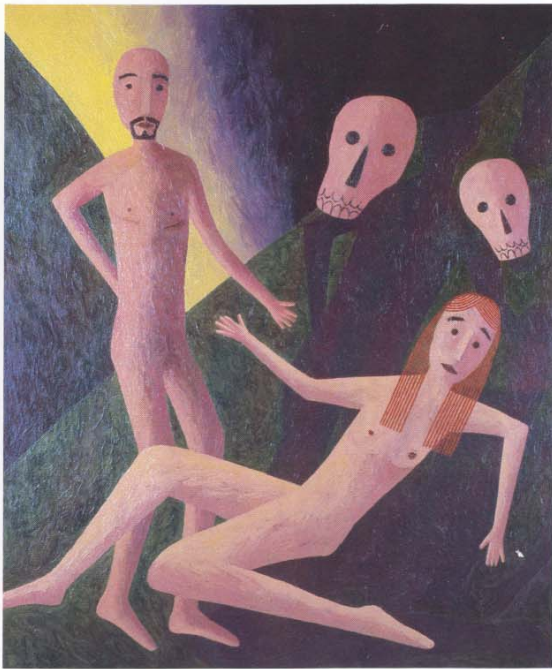
RUSS WARREN

The Promise / La promessa

1981, acrylic on canvas / acrilico su tela

44 x 37" / cm 112 x 94

Collection of / collezione / Daniel Indelli, Los Angeles, California



83

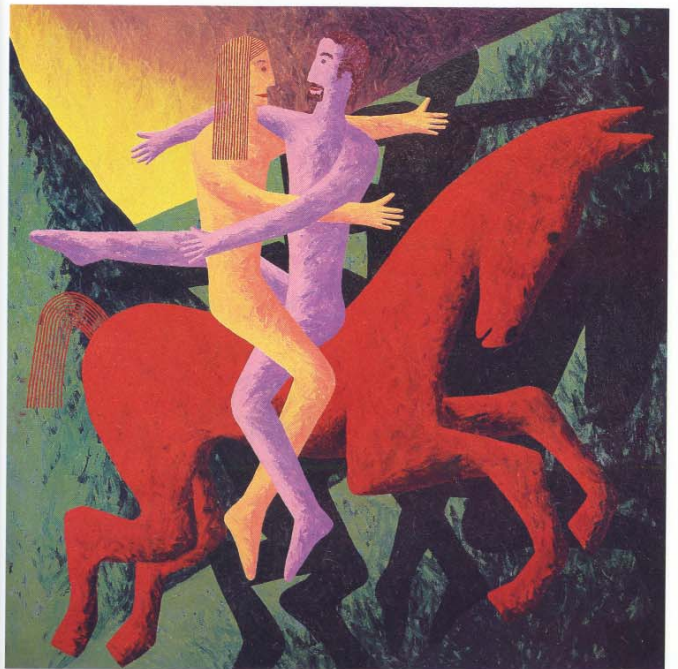
RUSS WARREN

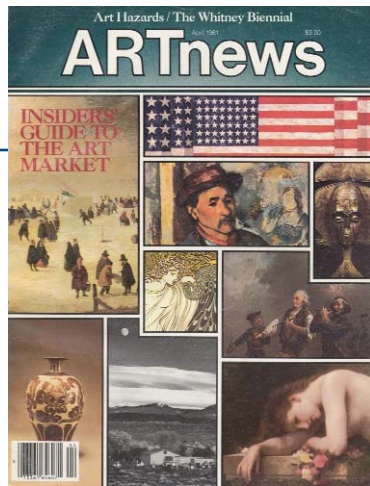
Joy Ride / Gita di piacere

1982, acrylic on canvas / acrilico su tela

55 1/2 x 55 1/2" / cm 141 x 141

Collection of / collezione / Mr. and Mrs. Joseph D. Shein, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania





p. 126 shown below



Courtesy Hamilton Gallery

edged master of a flock of younger artists: Kienholz has not shown in New York for close to a decade, although his work remains powerful; and Held's recent works are undeniably his best. But why Jack Tworok, Richard Diebenkorn and Ellsworth Kelly? It's not that there is anything wrong with their work, just that there were so many others who might have reasonably vied for the same honor that the reasons for their inclusion are far from clear.

It is significant, I think, that the catalogue, apart from a brief prologue written jointly by all the curators, makes no effort to reveal the criteria which governed their choices. One wonders how actively gallery dealers promoted one or another of their artists. One also wonders what the curators saw, if anything, on their national meanderings, since most of the chosen artists either live in New York or (including many of the

and modes of expression engaging American artists today."

"Diversity," "achievement" and "pre-dominant" are the key words here, and explain the inclusion of rising stars along with established masters. Julian Schnabel's one-man show at Mary Boone this past year, for example, was (for better or worse) the talk of the town; thus two of his paintings are displayed at the Whitney. Judy Pfaff, too, made quite a splash with her installation this fall at Holly Solomon, and her glorious little room in the Biennial is the result. Several bland gold-leafed wall reliefs by Lynda Benglis are in evidence, perhaps as a replacement for Barbara Schwartz's work in a related vein, which was included in the 1979 Biennial. Kim MacConnel, Jonathan Borofsky, Martin Puryear and Bryan Hunt are repeats we might reasonably have done without, since their work has not changed substantively nor is it irreplaceable in terms of the broader tendencies it may reflect. On the other hand, the same reasoning does perhaps justify giving Alice Aycock, Jennifer Bartlett, Nancy Holt and Elizabeth Murray (all included) another go.

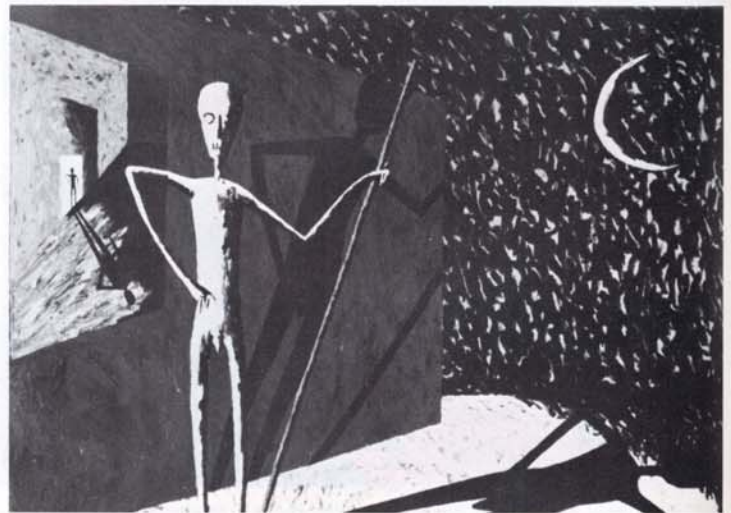
All in all, 27 artists were carryovers from the last Biennial, or just under one in four. Either what is considered "hot" changes little over a two-year span or the curators didn't spend enough time looking or they looked with closed minds or some combination of the above. Of the older artists or

ABOVE Rafael Ferrer, *El Gran Canibal*, 1979, 90 by 70 by 70 inches. RIGHT Larry Clark, *Untitled, from 42nd Street*, 1979, black and white photograph.

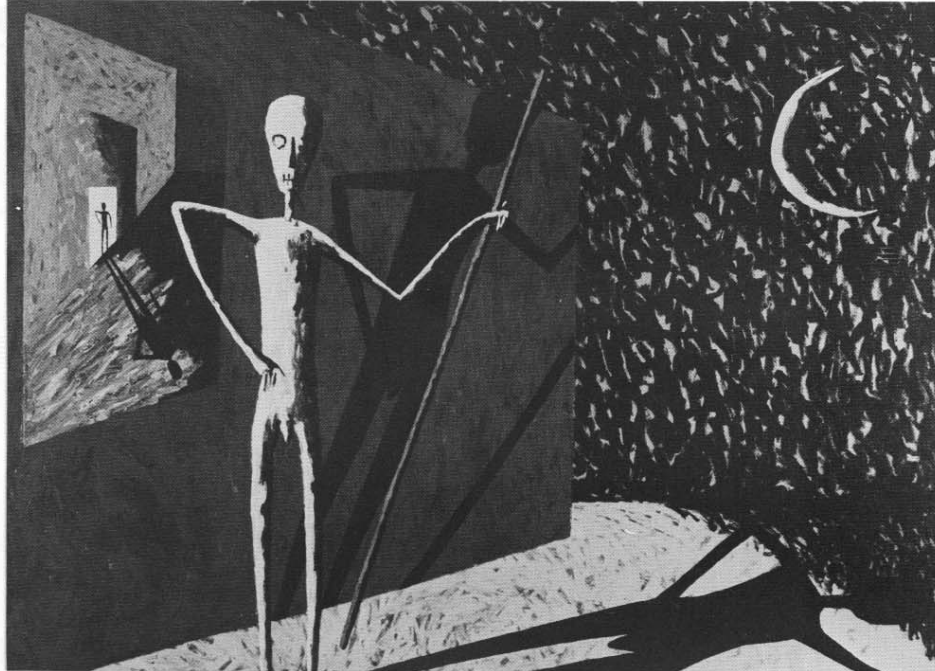
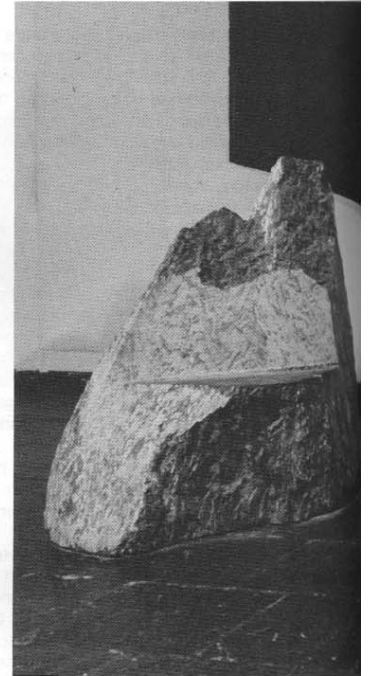
those with more entrenched reputations, it is easy to understand why Willem de Kooning, Edward Kienholz and Al Held were chosen: de Kooning is still the acknowl-



Courtesy Robert Freidus



Russ Warren, *Eta Noche*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 48 by 66 inches.

Russ Warren, *Ella Noche*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 48 × 66"

movies; I've only seen a third.) Yvonne Rainer's *Journeys From Berlin/1971*, a film exploring the connections between political terrorism and personal terror, is part of a series that includes Bette Gordon's *Empty Suitcases*; James Benning's compendium of his own work, *Grand Opera*; Kenneth Anger's meditation on Aleister Crowley, *Lucifer Rising*; and Robert Frank's diaristic *Life Dances On*. Over in video are two views of last year's Winter Olympics, Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn's *Olympic Fragments* and Nam June Paik's *Lake Placid*, as well as Peter D'Agostino's representational *Quarks* and Barbara Buckner's abstract and allusive *Hearts*, among others.

Installations in the funhouse: Buky Schwartz's elegant *In Real Time*, created for the Biennial, uses four monitors to capture the Biennial pilgrim's progress through a painted-yellow Constructivist space in which an upended mirror reflects and distorts the pedestrian's journey. In Michael Brewster's *Echocentric*, an anechoic chamber painted pale grey, the unremitting screech from a sound-generating box interferes with the peaceful, serene room that's the closest thing the Biennial has to a Zen space. The filmstrips in Paul Sharits' epochal *Episodic Generation*, a four-projector panorama, are projected latitudinally rather than longitudinally, creating an exhilarating, roller-coaster acrophobia. Vito Acconci's *Sliding Doorway*, a pair of bicycles which, if pedaled, would

reveal a scenic landscape to its pedal pusher, wasn't working and consequently sat riderless, more conceptual installation than illusionistic tour. This mechanical midway was punctuated by the fragmented narratives of Alexis Smith and Vernon Fisher, which provided recreational reading between interactive events. Although reasons for the high estimation of his work are elusive, Fisher, like Smith, capitalizes on an allusive text/image coupling that makes narratives accessible to non-readers.

Most Influential Artists:

Pfaff has probably spawned more emulators than any other artist included in the Biennial. Basically the concern of Pfaff and likeminded artists (and this includes Jonathan Borofsky) is to make walk-in paintings, dispersals that come out of a sensibility that motivated the likes of Kurt Schwitters (in his *Merzbau*) and Allan Kaprow (in early Happenings). Where Pfaff is concerned, this is combination sculpture and painting where she draws with 3-D materials, extending the dispersal principle of her earlier, more minimal, work across rangier spaces.

Lynda Benglis, also exploring the domain between wall and virtual space in her gold-leaved gesso reliefs, is an exponent of the Glitz School (gilded maximalism) as well as the implicit-narrative school: her configurations are comparative studies of morphologies—how a flounce resembles a bird on the wing,

how a wing resembles a fan. Benglis has been a huge influence on artists.

Stop! Stop! You're Both Right! Award:

Joel Shapiro's role in contemporary art is predictably cautious, and he produces a minimalist variant of Pfaff/Borofsky maximalism. Mr. Minimalist's concession is to go figurative, kind of, offering simple bronze stick figures doing arabesques.

Best New Departure By A Well-Known:

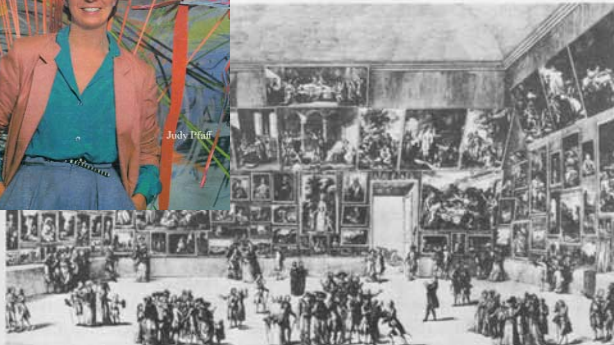
Wayne Thiebaud's aerial views of Bay Area freeways are pictorial Diebenkorns; Thiebaud is master of the conundrum that all art is formalist and that all art has content.

Most Promising Not Well-Known:

This year's winner is Russ Warren, whose impastoed, cartoony allegories of Death and Existentialism—Quixote-like stick figures that seem to be teetering on the edge of the abyss—make his work look like the dark side of Louisa Chase.

Material Pleasures:

Robert Kushner, Kim MacConnel and Judith Shea each demonstrate the versatility of cloths other than canvas. Kushner is the collagist, juxtaposing tulles, brocades and polyesters, and letting the fabric textures describe the contours of his identical twins in *Same Outfit*. The applied designs of Kim MacConnel—onto lengths of cotton—is about another kind of collage, the motifs symbolic of different kinds of



Lee Stalsworth

Today's biennials are descendants of annual European painting salons such as the Louvre's 1785 exhibition (left), depicted in an engraving by Johann Bernet. But greater opportunities to keep pace with developments in contemporary art have reduced the scale and ambition of biennials such as the Hirshhorn Museum's "Directions 1981" (right).

How Emerging Artists Really Emerge: Putting the Biennials Together

The process of shaping the leading invitational surveys is long and laborious, demanding countless hours of curatorial travel, studio visits and viewing of slides. But the question remains: What do these shows mean to the public?

by GRACE GLUECK

→ **R**uss Warren, 29, of Davidson, North Carolina, paints in a sophisticatedly childlike "new image" style, placing strange, surreal figures in spooky settings. The canvases done by Gael Stack, 39, of Houston, are eloquently calligraphic, evoking primitive sites and rituals. Lita Albuquerque, 35, of Venice, California, works in desert areas, where she incorporates such materials as rocks, earth and raw pigment in strong figurative silhouettes, constructed as if seen from above or afar. And Vernon Fisher, 38, of Denton, Texas, melds words and images in narrative panels that reflect the raucous impact of printed and visual media.

Though their work is vastly different,

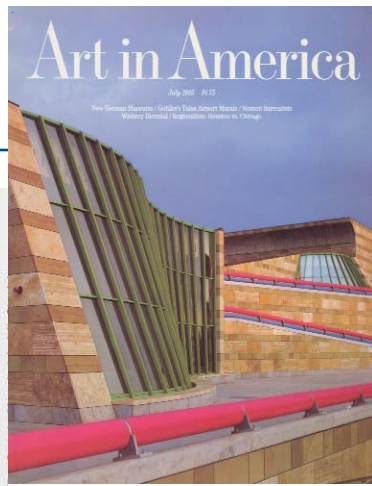
Grace Glueck is a reviewer and cultural news reporter for The New York Times and other publications.

these four artists have one thing in common. They've just hit the big time. Until now, their exposure has been local and regional, but this year they've made it on the national scene. The work of each appeared in at least one of the "biennial" shows mounted by three prestigious museums: the "1981 Biennial Exhibition" at the Whitney Museum, "19 Artists—Emergent Americans" at the Guggenheim Museum and "Directions 1981" at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. (Vernon Fisher, an all-star winner, exhibited in all three of them.)

These "biennials"—a word used by rote now to indicate large juried, invitational survey shows—are actually descendants of the big annual painting salons of 19th-century Europe and the blockbuster Venice Biennale, which began in the 1890s. Except in the case of the Whitney, however, which really does mount its show every two years,

they are often staged on a more irregular basis.

Traditionally the importance of the biennials has come from their showcasing of ideas, modes and current practices for audiences whose access to art on a country-wide basis was more restricted than it is today. Their interest lay not only in their exposure of new or regional talents to a "national" (read "big city") audience but in their providing a context for artists to view their own work in the light of what others were doing. But today the relative ease of viewing art—for both artists and their audiences—combined with the changes in its nature and the multiplicity of modes have tended to reduce the biennials in scale and ambition. Now, rather than attempting to report in full on the state of American art, they tend to be much skimpier shows organized by "star" curators or directors to reflect their individ-



ing Texas artists—among them sculptors James Surls and Luis Jimenez, and painters John Alexander, Dick Wray and Jim Roche. (One of Harithas's most prescient one-man shows featured the work of Julian Schnabel, who was then a painting student at the University of Houston.)

In the meantime, an image-oriented faculty in the art department of the University of Houston had been assembled by George Bunker, who had come from Philadelphia, a city itself known for its imagistic tendencies in the 1960s.⁵ James Surls, John Alexander, Gael Stack and eventually English artist Derek Boshier promoted an art which contrasted markedly with the prevailing New York School taste of local Houston collectors, shaped as it had been by the Museum of Fine Arts. By the late 1970s, Surls and Alexander were part of a network of Southern artists exploring the visual mythology and native mysticism of the Deep South. Folk art, particularly Mexican masks, had long influenced Houston artists, but now the primacy of Southern black folk art was acknowledged in the visual vocabulary of these Houston artists. Other components of the Southern experience, such as narration and the region's gothic obsession with history, were also being explored in the late '70s, as an early show of narrative art, curated by Paul Schimmel for the Contemporary Arts Museum, made abundantly clear.

Meanwhile the Chicago Imagist tradition had begun to exert some influence of its own on the scene developing in Houston. Gael Stack at the University of Houston and Earl Staley, who taught painting at the nearby University of St. Thomas, were Chicago natives who cut their professional teeth at the Art Institute of Chicago and, like so many of their peers, discovered folk art in the ethnographic collections at the Field Museum of Natural History. When they left northern Illinois for teaching jobs in Texas in the 1960s, they undoubtedly brought with them some of the Chicago sensibility. (It is worth noting that Staley, and his graduate assistant at the University of St. Thomas, Russ Warren, have been showing at Phyllis Kind, Chicago's leading Imagist

gallery, for several years now.) Chicago artists Ed Paschke, Karl Wirsum and Robert Lostutter showed at the Contemporary Arts Museum in the 1975 show "North, East, West, South and Middle," organized by Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, and painters from the Windy City have continued to show there, most recently Roger Brown and Ed Paschke.

The influences of pluralism, folk and ethnic art, artistic impulses from other regions, even the climatic conditions of Houston are all evident in the work comprising "Fresh Paint," but they don't gel convincingly enough to suggest a

Houston's familiarity with New York abstraction, combined with a native predilection for imagery, has produced a hybrid painting that uses both styles.

distinctive school of painting. The shared sensibilities which Rose identifies as evidence of a school are so general as to be clichés of regional art. Like other New York art figures who have ventured into the provinces, Rose is struck by the interest of Houston artists in humanitarian concerns and the belief that art and life are ultimately united. She connects the use of strong color and bright light in the paintings to the intensity of Southern light and the city's tropical heat; the dynamic imagery of much of the painting she sees as allied to the buoyant expansionist spirit that Houstonians are wont to boast about.

More interesting than such piecemeal speculation is the degree to which stylistic themes have been developed by Houston artists. Both allegorical painting, invested with the high morality of its 19th-century counterpart, and overtly classical subjects have remarkable sway in this show. As early as 1975, Earl Staley began painting allegorical subjects influenced by American Indian lore, an interest that grew out of his Chicago childhood experience with the Plains Indians exhibits at the Field Museum. By 1980, Staley had turned to Greco-Roman mythology, notably in work seen at the Hirshhorn Museum's "Directions 1981" show, and reinforced by two years in Italy on a Prix de Rome fellowship.

Staley's attraction to classicism is not unique in Houston, a city that would seem to be the cultural antithesis of ancient Greece or Rome were it not for the city's own aspirations to greatness. It is as though these Texas artists, finding themselves in an area without a long cultural history but endowed with a frontier society's lingering sense of destiny, have turned to ancient sources in search of universal truths. Underlying this quest is the moral assumption that art *should* contain such truth, an imperative that harks back to John Ruskin and beyond. For years, John Biggers, one of Houston's senior artists and the most eminent black artist in the city, has attempted to put this notion into practice by means of highly realistic narrative painting addressing Christian subject matter and the Afro-American experience. His chief protégé, Kermit Oliver, was one of the first Houston artists to set classical subjects in the local landscape, as he does in his togaed self-portrait *Who Is This that Cometh from Edom with Dyed Garments from Bosrah?*

The 19th-century *animalier* genre has also been resurrected in a number of works in this show, suggesting the traditional theme of the noble animal pitted against fickle nature. Melissa Miller's painting of a tiger in *Flood* is resonant with the apocalyptic drama of Delacroix. Jimmy Jalapeño's grisaille painting of two marble Nikes leading a bull to sacrifice makes an oblique approach to the animal in classical mythology.

The allegory applied to contemporary Houston is more biting and less grandiose. Derek Boshier, a Pop artist in London during the 1960s, takes a wry art-historical approach to Houston culture. His *Corporate Business*, laden with such symbols as a crystal ball and computer microchips, is a reserved analysis of modern Houston, while his *Everyday Opera* focuses on its melodramatic side. Bert Long is more overtly moralistic in his raw, naive paintings *Faceless America* and *The Family*.

Houston's familiarity with New York abstraction, combined with what seems to be a native predilection for image-making, also has produced a hybrid painting style borrowing from each. John Alexander, who moved to New York in 1980 and played a role in the conception of "Fresh Paint," is the leading proponent of this "abstract imagism." Alexander's paintings burst with the nervous gestures of a Jackson Pollock, but, in his hands, the



Arts | February 1982

Phyllis Kind Gallery, ad.

p. 74 shown below



'Love Movies' 1981 Acrylic on canvas 49 x 69"

RUSS WARREN

12 February
through
6 March 1982

PHYLLIS KIND GALLERY

226 E. Ontario
Chicago



mean-ing (mē'ning), n. [See mean.] Intention or purpose (archaic; as, "I am no honest man if there be any good meaning towards you," Shakespeare's "King Lear," i. 2. 190); also, that which is intended to be, or actually is, expressed or indicated; signification; import; sense; significance.—

RUSS WARREN Phyllis Kind
SANDRO CHIA Sperone Westwater Fischer
THOMAS ROSE Rosa Esman
JOHN WILLENBECHER Hamilton
GROUP SHOW Soho Center for Visual Artists

By SUSAN A. HARRIS

RUSS WARREN

In his second one-man show in New York, Russ Warren presents a world where cultural myth, personal experience/fantasy, and nightmare are inextricably intertwined. Unlike his previous show comprised primarily of interiors, this exhibition is made up of either landscapes or altogether ambiguous spaces. The figures have developed from skeletons into full-bodied, even sculptural, nude primitives whose very realities are in competition with those of their shadows. Pared down to simplified forms that echo the contours of surrounding mountains and trees, Warren's characters have robot-like eyes that uniformly stare blankly, whether dead or alive. Their movements are anything but natural; they are either rigidly angular or limp and floating, subject to some energy force other than gravity. Bodies, as well as architectural and landscape elements, are rendered in liquid, linear brushstrokes. Strongly modeled by contrasting lights and darks, everything is clearly defined by sharp outlines. The shadows are crisp, black silhouettes that may or may not have any clear relation to their "owners."

Equal in power to the pervasion of dread and enigma in Warren's paintings are his compelling, self-contained compositions. In his *Broken Fence*, for example, the figures fill and even define the entire space. The limbs of the levitating figure to the left parallel the top and left edges; those of the second figure echo the right and bottom edges. Their diagonally placed bodies, parallel to each other as well as to the "shadow,"

are weighted down only by the strict verticals of the fenceposts and the second figure's legs.

Whether one attributes the source of *The Survival of Cicero Rufus Perry* to St. Sebastian, to Texan-American history, or to the artist's own personal experience is ultimately of relative unimportance. The two nude figures form a cross in the center of the picture which takes place in a non-specific landscape. The shadow, roughly coinciding with the hovering thorn-pierced figure, folds over, conforming to the shapes of the mountains. In what may be read as the distance is a cathedral window with a tiny black shadow casting an elongated shadow on a red path/carpet, linking near and far, inside and outside, physical and spiritual. Warren's paintings form a cohesive body of work that undeniably engages the spectator's imagination (Phyllis Kind, *November 10-December 4*)

SANDRO CHIA

Exhibiting his sculptures for the first time in New York along with several new paintings, Sandro Chia draws upon a multitude of mythological and art historical sources as well as his own personal vision. Based loosely upon the mythological figure of Niobe who lost her fourteen children and turned to stone, Chia's works form a uniquely personal, if ambiguous, human drama. *Figure with Tear*, a massive bronze sculpture whose surface is extremely agitated, is the grieving mother on whose lap stands a small sculpture of a figure descending a ladder and holding a bundle. *Figure with Tear and Ar-*

row is just the reverse: a large woman descending a ladder with a bundle in her arms and a miniature version of *Figure with Tear* at her feet. The smaller figure in each work functions almost as a sketch, being less defined and more generalized. Very much about process and the artist's direct involvement, the large bronzes recall Picasso's neo-classical earth goddesses of the 1920s as well as Matisse's voluptuous bronzes.

The dialogue between the sculptures becomes still more complex as they interact with the paintings on the back wall, two of which are close studies in grisaille for the sculpture. Full, smooth, balloon-like forms, characteristic of Chia's previous work (with sculptural, almost architectonic drapery folds), the figures exist in a swirly, indefinable space. The grays, blacks, and whites of *Figure with Arrow and Tear* (the study for *Figure with Tear*) are set against a field of white and yellow overlaid with vibrantly red, active brushstrokes, the whole laid on a solid red ground. Chia's "floating" figures, his contrasting of grays and primary colors, his fusion of formal concerns and poetic content subordinating specific details to the total experience of the work of art and to the installation, are reminiscent of Chagall.

Whether or not and/or how the other two paintings fit in formally or narratively with the above-mentioned works is, quite deliberately, left a mystery. Between the two studies is *Future Sculpture*, a massive workman on a nebulous, aqueous ground with colorful, undulating horizontal lines. *Micio (Future Sculpture)* is a muscular human body with a cat face, his pants dropped. Outlined in green, the gray/white/black figure is set against a ground of red with green and yellow splashes. *Wet Painting, Don't Touch* is fauvist in color; the pose of the female figure, as well as its sculptural three-dimensionality, is like Matisse's *Reclining Figure*. As with the other paintings, the human form is set against an ambiguous space, an aura of cross-hatched blues, pinks, reds, greens, and yellows.

The power of the exhibition lies in the multi-level dialogue established between paintings and sculpture. Individu-



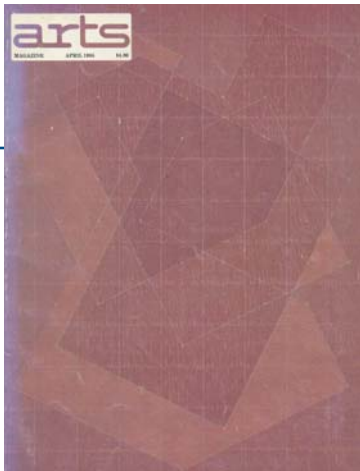
Russ Warren, *The Survival of Cicero Rufus Perry*, 1982. Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 48". Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.



Sandro Chia, *Figure with Tear and Arrow*, 1982. Bronze, 50 x 72 x 32". Courtesy Sperone Westwater Fischer Gallery.

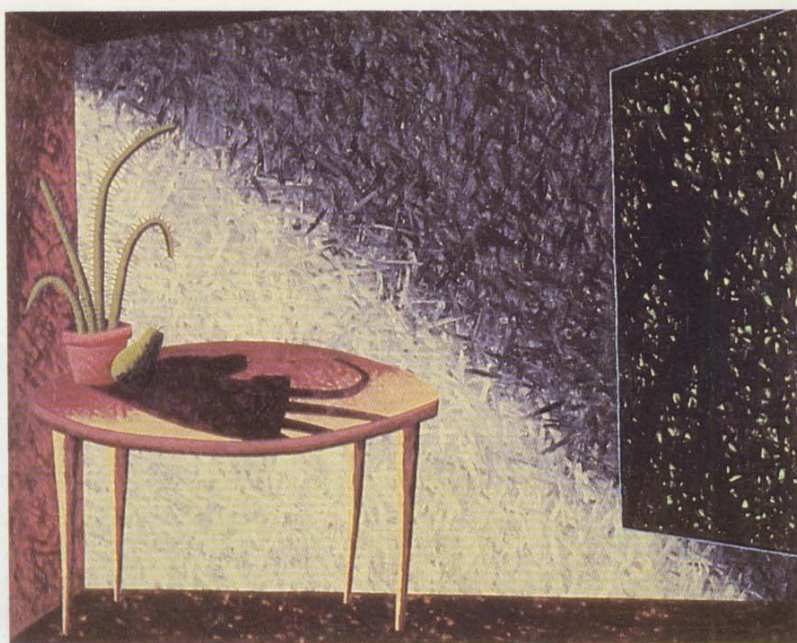
Thomas Rose, *Vuillard Interior*, 1982. Acrylic, wood, and wire mesh, 96 x 50 x 18". Courtesy Rosa Esman Gallery.





RUSS WARREN'S MAGIC THEATER

BARRY SCHWABSKY



Russ Warren, *Still Life with Pear*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60". Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.

Let's begin where the stage is set, with still life. There were two of them in Russ Warren's recent exhibition at the Phyllis Kind Gallery.¹ In *Still Life with Pear*, a cactus in a clay pot and a pear rest on an oval table. The shadow they cast falls threateningly across the table, clawlike. The light that caused this shadow falls diagonally against the wall which forms the picture's background. Yet there is no source, no point of access for this light. It seems to seep in from the corner where the left and rear walls meet. This rear wall, partly illuminated, is the site of an interaction at once strange and elementary. The dark portion of the wall is predominantly violet-blue, but it has highlights of a creamy yellow. The lit portion of the wall is of this same yellow, with undertones of the same blue. One sees this wall primarily as texture, as a kind of proving ground for the basic element in Warren's technique of paint application: a brushstroke which is light, delicate, and at the same time also jabbing, harassing. The thorns on the cactus rhyme with this basic brushstroke, as does vegetable life in general in these paintings. In any case, a simple complementarity asserts itself here in Warren's use of color. Nothing very special about that, except that where this light and that shadow meet, the effect of those quick, light, aggressive brushstrokes as they cross from one realm to another is fireworks.

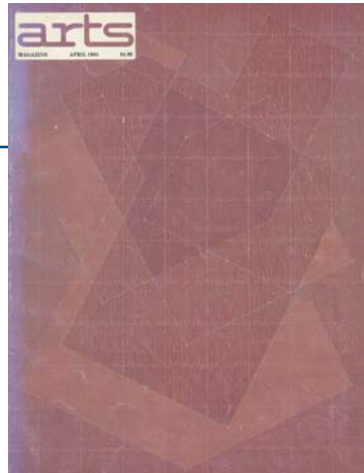
There is more to this picture. To the right, at an oblique angle to the rear wall, there is an opening: a door or a window, we can't quite say. It seems to float there like a screen, to have come into this space from somewhere else rather than being simply a passage between two places. It is filled with darkness and little points of light, and with a figure which is only the shadow of a figure, a figure in motion, about to enter or about to pass by.

Still Life with Pear, it seems, is an allegory about shadows. There are three kinds of shadow in this painting. First, across the back wall, there is the shadow which divides the canvas into two great triangles. This shadow is complementary to the light with which it interacts. Then there is the shadow of the cactus and pear, which we think about not so much in relation to the light whose absence it is, but to the objects which caused it by blocking that light, and whose nature it reports in a distorted way. Finally there is the figure in the window or doorway, a shadow which we see in relation to a less perfect darkness rather than to light as such, and not at all in relation to

the body which we may suppose it represents but which is not otherwise accessible to us.

At least since Plato and his cave, the shadow has been the image of all other images. And a shadow is, in short, always a little shady. Images are always potentially deceptive. In Warren's painting the shadow-figure on the right and the shadow of the pear and cactus on the left may be seen as images of two different kinds of images, which rhetoric has named, respectively, symbol and allegory. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that a symbol "always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible," while allegory consists of an arbitrary association of an image with what it signifies.² While the shadow in the doorway cannot be differentiated from the figure it represents, we can measure the disjunction between the cactus and its shadow. Coleridge was concerned, for both theological and aesthetic reasons, with denigrating allegory to the benefit of symbol. In this he is part of the mainstream of Romantic aesthetics. But Warren's painting suggests that in the gap between image and referent characteristic of allegory lies a knowledge which their collapsing in the symbol denies us. It is this gap that allows for perspective, for critical comparison. Yet symbol communicates a mystery that is unavailable to allegory. The painting gives each its due, as it does light and shade, presenting an even balance between the two areas. But the most poignant effects occur where light and shade mingle, however antagonistic their encounter may be.

Warren's still lifes are set in interiors which remind us of empty stage sets. They are charged with a drama which is about to occur or has just taken place. With the entrance of the human figure into the painting, the performance begins. Who are these figures? They are, always, puppetlike, and usually naked and hairless. In *The Burial of Simone* four of these unreal figures, bright red, carry the body of a fifth whose redness seems to have been drained away. The faces of the corpse bearers, though masklike, are not entirely without expression: they are grave, concentrated. With their twisting, weightless bodies (they appear to be walking above rather than upon the



Russ Warren, *Lounge Act*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 90". Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.

spearlike grass), they are involved in a kind of ritual or dance. One thinks, perhaps, of Kleist's essay on the puppet theater: "We shall find [grace] at its purest in a body which is entirely devoid of consciousness or which possesses it in an infinite degree; that is, in the marionette or the god."³ But which are these—more or less than human? Aware of the importance of shadows in these paintings, we are quick to notice that only poor Simone casts one. His bearers, apparently, have not fallen into materiality.

Even more than in *The Burial of Simone*, the grass on *Masked Don* is used like a theatrical prop, a sign for grass. In *Hurricane*, the talonlike wave threatening to engulf two lovers is also as harmlessly immobile as a scenic backdrop. In *Lounge Act*, we encounter not only a theatrical mode of representation but also a representation of theater. Again, shadow is used as a sign distinguishing one of the figures from the others, but in this case it is the performer's (stripper's?) lack of one which distinguishes her from her audience. This, of course, is a different kind of ritual, a different kind of dance. And it is no longer a matter of simple presence or absence of shadow. Look at the five male figures that make up the audience. They are all the same, yet each is differentiated first by stance and gesture, then by the degree to which he casts shadow and to which shadow invests him.

Lounge Act depicts what should be a noisy scene yet is a strangely quiet picture, or rather a silent one. Somehow we know that this world of dance and ceremony, of sign and gesture, is one without language, without music. Mouths are always closed; communication between these figures is not by speaking. The most common gesture is an outstretched arm with an open hand. We see this in *Hurricane*, *The Magician*, and *Camping Incident*, as well as in *Lounge Act*. In

The Defeated South it is an angel who uses this gesture. The man on horseback, saluting, hands his hat (the only item of clothing in the picture, emphasizing its function as another of Warren's theatrical props) to the winged figure who descends to receive it, and who is of the same color as the hat. A fire burns in the distance, just visible at the horizon. Two figures lie trampled under the horse's feet as another flees. In this picture every figure (even the angel) casts a shadow; in defeat the weight of self-consciousness extends everywhere. Yet this defeat, apparently, is a kind of revelation—what else are angels for? To proffer the emblem of leadership to this aerial being must signify the surrender to a subtler, less material power.

The magician in Warren's painting of that title holds another figure aloft without touching it—with "no visible means of support." Perhaps this is Warren's allegory of his own task as an artist. Looking at these mannered, accomplished, witty paintings, we may be lucky enough to experience that enthusiasm which seems to lift us momentarily and inexplicably off the ground.

1. Entitled "Emblems of the Unseeable," this exhibition was seen at the Knight Gallery, Charlotte, N.C. (September 14–November 4, 1984) as well as the Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York (December 8, 1984–January 5, 1985). It will also travel to the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh (March 9–June 2, 1985).

2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, ed. by R.J. White, *Collected Works*, vol. 6 (Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 30.

3. Heinrich von Kleist, "Puppet Theatre," tr. by Beryl de Zoete, *Salmagundi*, no. 33-34 (Spring/Summer 1976), p. 88.