Post Painterly Abstraction

Clement Greenberg

This exhibition with its accompanying essay was Greenberg's attempt to describe a period style that appeared to replace the painterly abstraction of the preceding generation known popularly as Abstract Expressionism. His choice of Wölfflin's terminology was apt but perhaps unfortunate; Greenberg disliked the label "Color Field" which had been applied to some of the art that he admired -- why, I don't know; after all, most art labels are the work of journalists and few are descriptive in any meaningful way. The essay may not have remained current, but the phrase "Post Painterly Abstraction" stuck. It came to be used as a label for any art that Clement Greenberg was presumed to advocate; this in spite of his disclaimer in the final paragraph (Greenberg's disclaimers were usually disregarded). When abstraction became painterly in a new way in the 1970s, Greenberg became an advocate, but the old label stuck: the painterly abstraction of Oltski and Poons was referred to as "post painterly." So much for labels.

THE GREAT SWISS art historian, Heinrich Wölfflin, used the German word, *malerisch*, which his English translators render as "painterly," to designate the formal qualities of Baroque art that separate it from High Renaissance or Classical art. Painterly means, among other things, the blurred, broken, loose definition of color and contour. The opposite of painterly is clear, unbroken, and sharp definition, which Wölfflin called the "linear." The dividing line between the painterly and the linear is by no means a hard and fast one. There are many artists whose work combines elements of both, and painterly handling can go with linear design, and vice versa. This still does not diminish the usefulness of these terms or categories. With their help -- and keeping in mind that they have nothing to do with value judgments -- we are able to notice all sorts of continuities and significant differences, in the art of the present as well as of the past, that we might not notice otherwise.

The kind of painting that has become known as Abstract Expressionism is both abstract and painterly. Twenty years ago this proved a rather unexpected combination. Abstract art itself may have been born amid the painterliness of Analytical Cubism, Leger, Delaunay, and Kandinsky thirty years earlier, but there are all kinds of painterliness, and even Kandinsky's seemed restrained by comparison with Hofmann's and Pollock's. The painterly beginnings of abstract and near-abstract art would appear, anyhow, to have been somewhat forgotten, and during the 1920's and 1930's abstract art had become almost wholly identified with the flat silhouettes and firm contours of Synthetic Cubism, Mondrian, the Bauhaus, and Miro. (Klee's art was an exception, but the smallness

of his works made their painterly handling relatively unobtrusive; one became really aware of Klee's painterliness only when it was "blown up" later on by artists like Wols, Tobey, and Dubuffet.) Thus the notion of abstract art as something neatly drawn and smoothly painted, something with clean outlines and flat, clear colors, had become pretty well ingrained. To see this all disappear under a flurry of strokes, blotches, and trickles of paint was a bewildering experience at first. It looked as though all form, all order, all discipline, had been cast off. Some of the labels that became attached to Abstract Expressionism, like "*informel*" and "Action Painting," definitely implied this; one was given to understand that what was involved was an utterly new kind of art that was no longer art in any accepted sense.

This was, of course, absurd. What was mostly involved was the disconcerting effect produced by wide-open painterliness in an abstract context. That context still derived from Cubism -- as does the context of every variety of sophisticated abstract art since Cubism, despite all appearances to the contrary. The painterliness itself derived from a tradition of form going back to the Venetians. Abstract Expressionism -- or Painterly Abstraction, as I prefer to call it -- was very much art, and rooted in the past of art. People should have recognized this the moment they began to be able to recognize differences of *quality* in Abstract Expressionism.

Abstract Expressionism was, and is, a certain style of art, and like other styles of art, having had its ups, it had its downs. Having produced art of major importance, it turned into a school, then into a manner, and finally into a set of mannerisms. Its leaders attracted imitators, many of them, and then some of these leaders took to imitating themselves. Painterly Abstraction became a fashion, and now it has fallen out of fashion, to be replaced by another fashion -- Pop art -- but also to be continued, as well as replaced, by something as genuinely new and independent as Painterly Abstraction itself was ten or twenty years ago.

The most conspicuous of the mannerisms into which Painterly Abstraction has degenerated is what I call the "Tenth Street touch" (after East Tenth Street in New York), which spread through abstract painting like a blight during the 1950s. The stroke left by a loaded brush or knife frays out, when the stroke is long enough, into streaks, ripples, and specks of paint. These create variations of light and dark by means of which juxtaposed strokes can be graded into one another without abrupt contrasts. (This was an automatic solution for one of the crucial technical problems of abstract painting: that of asserting the continuity of the picture plane when working more or less "in the flat" -- and it's one of the reasons why the "Tenth Street touch" caught on the way it did.) Out of these close-knit variations or gradations of light and dark, the typical Abstract Expressionist picture came to be built, with its typical density of accents and its packed, agitated look.

In all this there was nothing bad in itself, nothing necessarily bad as art. What turned this constellation of stylistic features into something bad as art was its standardization, its reduction to a set of mannerisms, as a dozen, and then a thousand, artists proceeded to maul the same viscosities of paint, in more or less the same ranges of color, and with the same "gestures," into the same kind of picture. And that part of the reaction against Painterly Abstraction which this show tries to document is a reaction more against standardization than against a style or school, a reaction more against an attitude than against Painterly Abstraction as such.

As far as style is concerned, the reaction presented here is largely against the mannered drawing and the mannered design of Painterly Abstraction, but above all against the last. By contrast with the interweaving of light and dark gradations in the typical Abstract Expressionist picture, all the artists in this show move towards a physical openness of design, or towards linear clarity, or towards both. They continue, in this respect, a tendency that began well inside Painterly Abstraction itself, in the work of artists like Still, Newman, Rothko, Motherwell, Gottlieb, Mathieu, the 1950-54 Kline, and even Pollock. A good part of the reaction against Abstract Expressionism is, as I've already suggested, a continuation of it. There is no question, in any case, of repudiating its best achievements.

Almost a quarter of the painters represented in this show continue in one way or another to be painterly in their handling or execution. One of them, John Ferren, even retains the "Tenth Street touch," but by boxing it within a large framing area he somehow manages to get a new expressiveness from it. Sam Francis's liquefying touch is of a kind familiar to Abstract Expressionism at large, but even in his closed and solidly filled paintings of the early 1950's that touch somehow conveys light and air. Helen Frankenthaler's soakings and blottings of paint, which go back almost as far, open rather than close the picture, and would do so even without the openness of her layout. Arthur McKay's heavily inlaid surfaces relate to Painterly Abstraction in France, but the linear clarity, and plainness, of his design fend off what might be oppressive associations.

Clarity and openness as such, I hasten to say, are relative qualities in art. In so far as they belong to the physical aspects of painting they are but means, neutral in themselves and guaranteeing nothing in the way of ultimate aesthetic value. There is far more ultimate clarity and ultimate openness in an otherwise crowded and murky picture by Rembrandt than in many another painter's clear hues and unmarked areas. The physical clarity and openness of the art in this show do not make it necessarily better than other kinds of art, and I do not claim that the openness and clarity which these artists favor are what make their works necessarily succeed. I do claim, however, that it is to these instrumental qualities that the paintings in this exhibition owe their freshness, as distinct from whatever success or lack of success they may have

as aesthetic finalities. And I do claim -- on the basis of experience alone -- that openness and clarity are more conducive to freshness in abstract painting at this particular moment than most other instrumental qualities are -- just as twenty years ago density and compactness were.

Having said this, I want to say, too, that this show is not intended as a pantheon, as a critic's choice of the best new painters. It is meant to illustrate a new trend in abstract painting. It includes a number of artists who I do think are among the best new painters, but it does not include all of these. Even if it did, it still would not be a show of "the best new painters." Thirty-one is simply too large a number for that.

Among the things common to these thirty-one, aside from their all favoring openness or clarity (and all being Americans or Canadians), is that they have all learned from Painterly Abstraction. Their reaction against it does not constitute a return to the past, a going back to where Synthetic Cubist or geometrical painting left off. Some of the artists in this exhibition look "hard-edged," but this by itself does not account for their inclusion. They are included because they have won their "hardness" from the "softness" of Painterly Abstraction; they have not inherited it from Mondrian, the Bauhaus, Suprematism, or anything else that came before.

Another thing the artists in this show, with two or three exceptions, have in common is the high keying, as well as lucidity, of their color. They have a tendency, many of them, to stress contrasts of pure hue rather than contrasts of light and dark. For the sake of these, as well as in the interests of optical clarity, they shun thick paint and tactile effects. Some of them dilute their paint to an extreme and soak it into unsized and unprimed canvas (following Pollock's lead in his black and white paintings of 1951). In their reaction against the "handwriting" and "gestures" of Painterly Abstraction, these artists also favor a relatively anonymous execution. This is perhaps the most important motive behind the geometrical regularity of drawing in most of the pictures in this show. It certainly has nothing to do with doctrine, with geometrical form for its own sake. These artists prefer trued and faired edges simply because these call less attention to themselves as drawing -- and by doing that they also get out of the way of color.

These common traits of style go to make up a trend, but they definitely do not constitute a school, much less a fashion. That may come yet, but it hasn't so far. Otherwise many of the painters in this show would be better known than they are right now. Right now it's Pop art, which is the other side of the reaction against Abstract Expressionism, that constitutes a school and a fashion. There is much in Pop art that partakes of the trend to openness and clarity as against the turgidities of second generation Abstract Expressionism, and there are one or two Pop artists -- Robert Indiana and the "earlier" James Dine -- who could fit into this show. But as diverting as Pop art is, I happen not to find

it really fresh. Nor does it really challenge taste on more than a superficial level. So far (aside, perhaps, from Jasper Johns) it amounts to a new episode in the history of taste, but not to an authentically new episode in the evolution of contemporary art. A new episode in that evolution is what I have tried to document here.

I. According to John O'Brian who published Greenberg's text in Vol IV of the *Collected Writings*, Greenberg selected all the artists represented in the exhibition, except for those from California, who were selected by James Elliott, curator, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This is somewhat at odds with Mr. Elliot's acknowledgment in the catalogue Foreword that Fred Martin of the Sasn Francisco Art Association arranged for Greenberg to see works in the San Francisco area. Could it be that only the Los Angeles area artists were selected by Mr. Elliott?