Viewpoint on Art

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Biennial Is a 4-Star Show

By Andrew Hudson

THE CORCORAN Biennial Exhibition of American Painting stands or falls as a survey on the strength of its Invitational Section, developed and selected by the Corcoran staff.

Going back to this year's exhibition (the 30th) for perhaps the sixth or seventh time, I had a "revelational" afternoon. It was one of those occasions when one sees more clearly than usual and when comparison of paintings which one makes with reasonable accuracy at other times suddenly stands out more boldly.

It's a flash of recognition without doubt. One has the feeling that one's eye is fully "in tune" with the art (perhaps in the way that a violinist may sense that he is playing at his very best—beyond himself, better than he thought he could).

My "revelation" confirmed all the impressions and intuitions that had been building up among my responses to the show and stamped with certainty the general conclusion toward which they were heading. The distinction between certain paintings and the rest of the show suddenly became glaringly obvious.

The general conclusion is that there are four artists in the exhibition, and only four, who have any potential as candidates for the ranks of the masters.

THE "REVELATION" brought with it renewed awareness that what matters in painting is that the final work is activated in such a way that the format (whether on canvas or board) is brought to life to speak loud and clear with a single voice; that it declares itself a work of art with unified intensity and conviction.

This is the lesson great art continually teaches, whatever the personality of the artist or the limitations of his style and what is possible in art in his period.

Giotto arrived at this complete, unified intensity and vitality chiefly by way of a geometric simplification and harmony of line; Rembrandt achieved it through a play of light against dark, and a building up of highlighted, impastoed areas. For Cezanne, it was a matter of small, separately colored brushstrokes, painstakingly arranged.

The high abstract art of this century shows us—if the entirely different and "abstract" approaches toward representation of Giotto, Rembrandt and Cezanne do not—that success as a work of art has nothing to do with success in terms of photographic illusions.

it is—then cries for a "return to nature" are beside the point.

IT WAS THE work of four abstract artists which spoke out to me at the Corcoran show. In looking at the two Nolands, it was an awareness of the precision of the formats of the long horizontal paintings, of how each of them held the exact amount of color for that color to sing through, of how within the simple design of four horizontal bands the adjacent colors brought nuances out of each other—flushes of red, suggestions of yellow—in an exact and yet indefinable way, that told me here was painting of a very high order.

In contrast to this exactness, this bringing of the work of art to such a pitch of poetry and fulfillment, the work hanging nearby (Raffaele, Dine, Youngerman) suddenly looked very trivial.

Coming to "see" both Nolands so acutely helped me respond—at last—to the four Olitskis, some of which I had been finding difficult to grasp.

The margins in Olitski's paintings — drawn over the sprayed color in lines of pastel, painted in thick, creamy paint, or brought about by an abrupt, silhouetted change of spray color, either adjacent to the extreme edge of the format, or sloping in at an angle, crazily out of kilter—made sense at last.

I saw how he was concerned with bringing the whole format into an intensity of feeling, how these margins were an unusual method of doing this, how they offset the sprayed color and gave them a little extra jolt. The chief example of Olitski's powers as a painter was the way these canvasses were "cropped" in just the right place to give them maximum intensity.

Near the Olitskis—and also concerned with "margins" along the side of the format, but in a quite different way—are the paintings of Ludwig Sanders. For me, these were the discovery of the show. I had admired Sanders's work before, but had never realized it was this good.

Still working in what may be called the "easel tradition" (as opposed to the mural-sized paintings prevalent today), Sanders relates back to Cubism and Mondrian in a kind of pre-"Abstract Expressionist" way and seems independent of "post-Cubist" developments.

SANDERS'S ART, like Noland's, has to do with placing areas of single colors next to one another. With Sanders, this "placing" is more of a "composition" in the old sense, a matter of balancing parts of the canvas off against one another. (Noland's painting is much more a "single image.")

Three of Sanders' paintings in the present show (the brown "Arapaho III"; the blue with violet and green "Manitov II"; and the little yellow "Scuppernong VI" which is a painting to fall in love with) are among the best work there.

The fourth pre-eminent artist was Adolph Gottlieb, the only surviving major figure of the "Abstract Expressionist" movement represented in the show.

Gottlieb's pictorial grasp is revealed by his ability to place a few forms within a white canvas in such a way that all of the white is brought to life—right up to the edges of the canvas.

His art is far more deliberate and more consciously done than it seems at a first glance. The "burst" shape at the bottom of the vertical "Glow" is far from a "one-shot" affair: splatters and spots of black have been canceled out by a coat of white that hovers around the drawn black shape first painted on a grayer ground. The trailing wisp of black at the right, which so effectively "answers" the threads of black at the left, giving the whole painting an upward fling, has been added over this white coat. What seems spontaneous is, in part, deliberately planned.

And in "Red, Blue, Yellow" the black shapes have been rubbed out and corrected many times, and the yellow disc—a brilliant touch —is placed on just such a rubbed-out area.

The other painters in the show aren't aware of the format and of the unity of the painting in the way that these four artists are. Next to Gottlieb's work, Johns's and Stamos's positioning within the format of flags and rectangles is trite. Both artists seem to think that "texture" is going to save the day for them (Johns going so far as to make this "texture" three-dimensional with an "assemblage" of ruler, sponge, beer can, turps bottle, etc.). "Texture," in fact, can positively ruin a painting — as is the case with Pearlstein's nudes, where the paint handling is so labored and uncomfortable.

Jenkins, Frankenthaler and Dzubas follow after Noland and Olitski in moving away from "open space" painting to a filling of the whole format with color (the results of this filling-in, in Jenkins and Frankenthaler, is disastrous). Frankenthaler looks slight here, and not at her best. Dzubas's color harks back to the 1930s and Georgia O'Keeffe. His paintings are more successful than those of Jenkins and Frankenthaler, though they seem a little thin.

Stella shows that he can use colors together, at last, in three of his five paintings. However, they're a little pretty and I suspect that the silhouetted shape of his canvasses will turn out to be a built-in fragility without enduring interest. Poons's paintings in the show are of 1965, done before those exhibited recently at Castelli's, which showed such an improvement.

ONLY TWO artists, besides the four outstanding ones, seemed aware of the problem of "unity and intensity of the format." However, in both cases the unity is derivative, not personal; and their painting consequently is forced. These are McLaughlin, who takes his concept from Newman, and Downing, whose present work is an amalgamation of Noland and Stella.