

Responses to Neo-Expressionism

Abstract artists express their views on neo-expressionist painting and on the direction their own work is taking

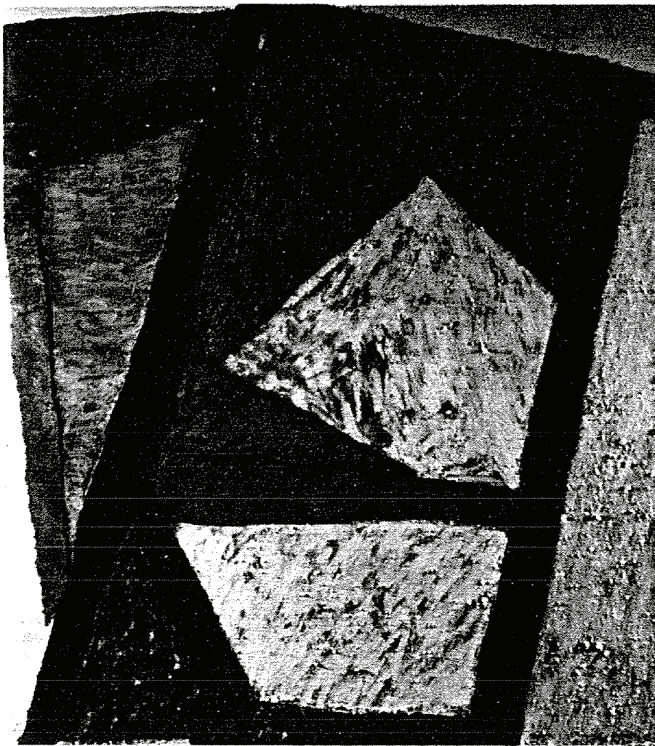
Tiffany Bell

The following comments and opinions have been gathered from interviews and informal discussions held over the last few months with abstract painters about what they think of neo-expressionist painting. The artists I spoke to range in age and position in the art world and included: Michael Goldberg, Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, Robert Mangold, Sean Scully, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Lynn Umlauf, James Muehleman, Allen Furbeck and Linda Levit. Although there are

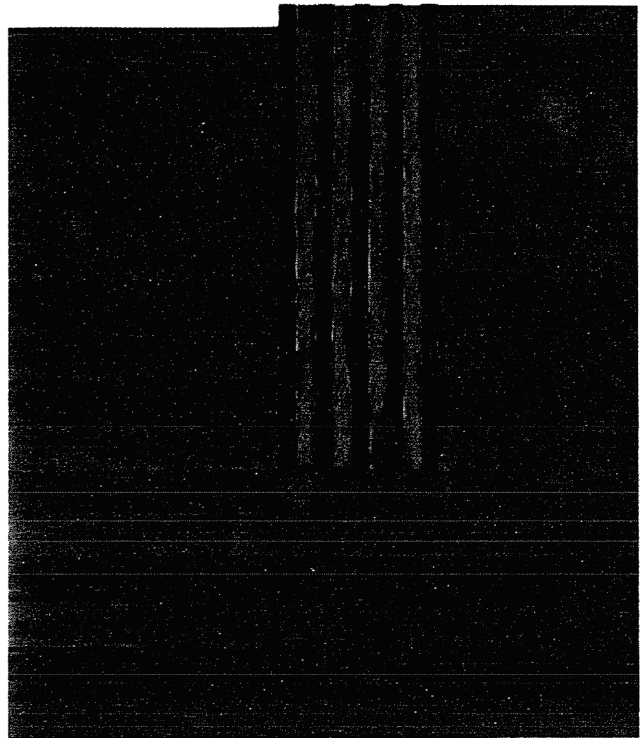
more and less painterly artists among this group, the differences in their paintings no longer look as great as they did a few years ago. They all make non-representational, non-figurative paintings.

My intention in making this investigation, though stemming somewhat from a sense that these artists working outside of a figurative or narrative tradition are being misrepresented as overly intellectual, uninvolved with human concerns and less expressive,

was not to set up an opposition between two kinds of painting. Rather, it was to test the *zeitgeist*; to see if these artists were similarly, or even in a parallel way, feeling the need for change so evident in the work of the neo-expressionist artist. In so doing, I hoped to come closer to a description of the intentions, if not the subject matter in abstract painting. I also wanted to find out what these artists think about the overwhelming interest in painting, which is often described in terms of its



Michael Goldberg, *Old Grottos VII*, 1981.
Mixed media, 84 x 75".



Sean Scully, *Catherine*, 1982.
Oil on canvas, 114 x 96".

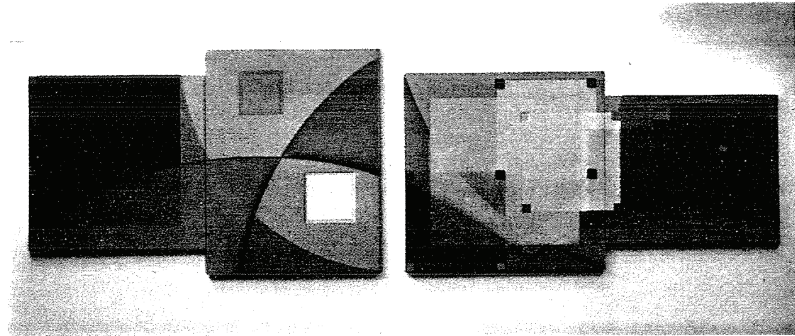
difference from non-representational, minimal art.

As pointed out by almost all the artists, neo-expressionism inadequately defines a wide range of painting. Generally, however, the discussions did not center on any one artist's work but on neo-expressionism understood as figuration and an emphasis on self-expression presented through images and/or a gestural manner of painting.

I don't feel I have to like a work of art but I sure as hell don't want to be able to deny a work of art.

Michael Goldberg

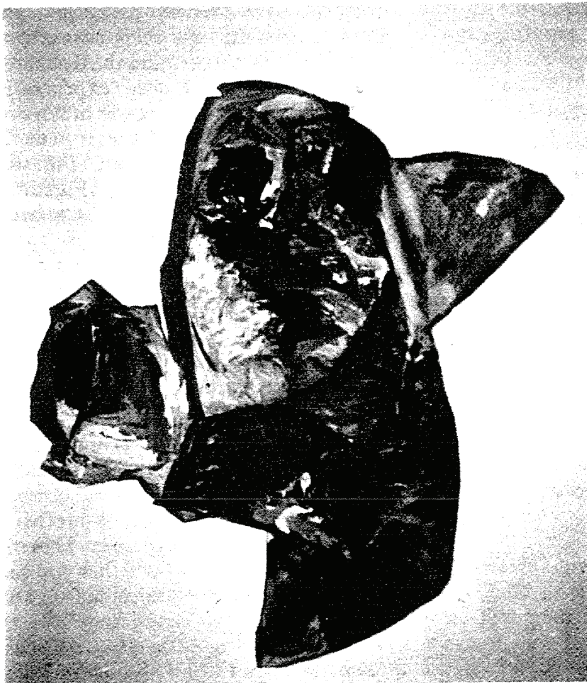
Michael Goldberg feels that this new trend "does not impinge on his life dramatically." Like all the artists who have been painting many years, his work has developed to a point where it synthesizes many things in a way that determines its own course. When looking at art, Goldberg does not look to the work of young artists for examples, but to that of Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Brunelleschi, Courbert, Manet and Pollock. He recognizes a need for, and is concerned with introducing more explicit content in his paintings.



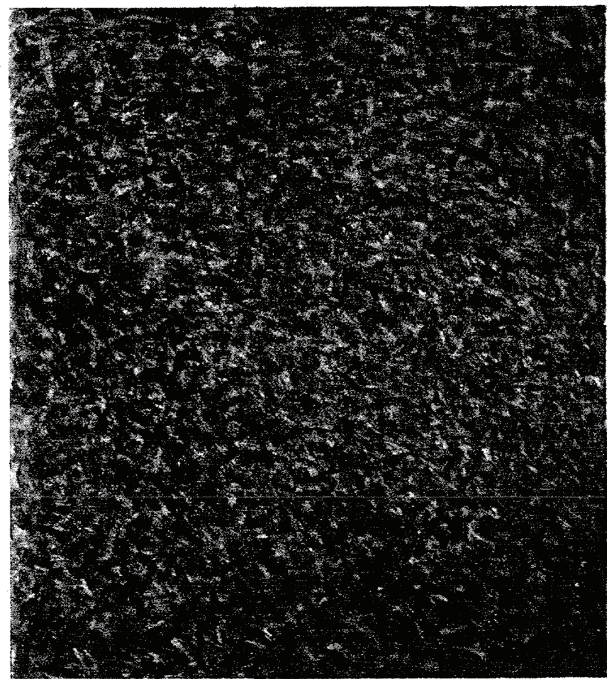
Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, 6th Study for Masurian lakes, 1981. 22 x 30". Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York. Photo L. Davenport.

He says that the "minimal mode feels very exhausted today," and his work over the last few years has included obvious allusions to architecture and landscape, but not as representational images. References exist but are complicated by and contrasted to the formal aspects of the painting. If he was a younger artist, Goldberg says he would be painting in the neo-expressionist mode. He sees the possibility for more latitude there than in a geometric or minimal mode, and believes in "extending visual and emotional horizons through the act of painting." Goldberg himself, however, is not interested in expressionism. Of German expressionist painting, both older and newer, he

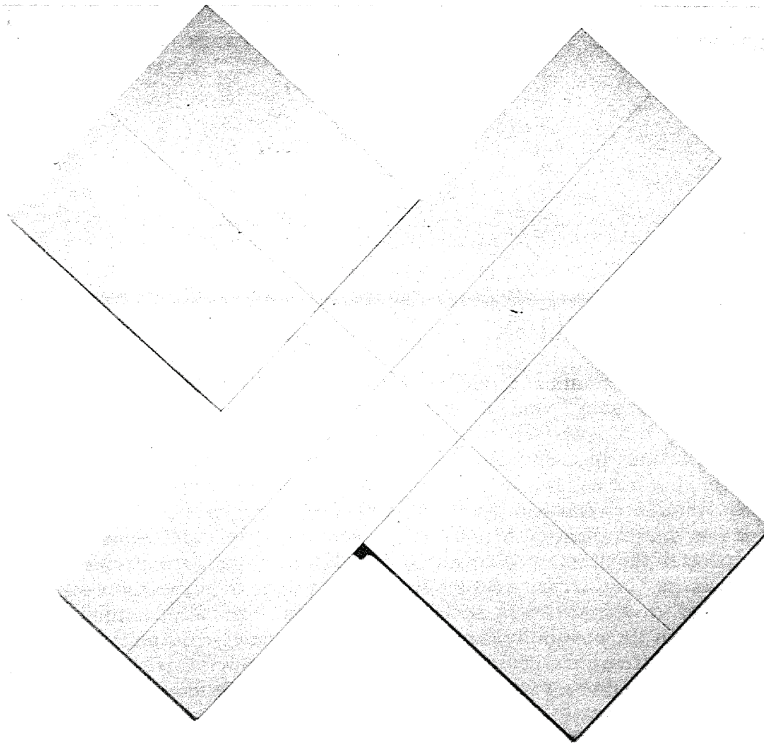
says that with the exception of Kirchner he does not think of it as a major art form. It is too "loaded with nostalgia and literary sentiment." And as for the American expressionism of the present, he characterizes it as infantile leftism which is itself reactionary. He finds it does not sustain prolonged consideration; it is instantaneous and anecdotal. The introduction of content has been made in a simplistic and contrived way which responds to the demands of "an intelligently self-motivated participatory audience." Goldberg does not believe the art deals with quality, the essential element which sustains a work of art. It is not so much a question of style but of incorporating



Lynn Umlauf, Untitled. Acrylic, plastic, paper, canvas, 206 x 239 cm.



James Muehleemann, Sea Biscuit, 1981. Oil on canvas, 76 x 64".



Robert Mangold, *X Work no. II*, 1980.
Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 60 x 60" diagonal.
Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York.

a sense of necessity or urgency. He suggests that his interests—landscape, architecture and human scale—are universal, not *à la mode*.

Robert Ryman's painting even more than Goldberg's, seems to direct its own course of development. It is in fact somewhat surprising to find that Ryman visits the galleries to see neo-expressionist work. He is familiar with the painting and finds good painters among these artists. Such aspects as David Salle's division of canvases and juxtapositions of opposites interest him, but he finds neo-expressionist work, in a more general sense, hindered by the "ball and chain" of symbolism and narrative. Furthermore, he believes there is much that is familiar in this work, which is not retrogressive, but has little "discovery" in it. He implied that this aspect of painting, a kind of enlightenment in the aesthetic means, was of greater interest in art than explicit subject matter. Although Ryman finds some of the work interesting, he feels that the most exciting painting to emerge will not be narra-

tive, representational painting, but a kind of "object painting." As to his own work, he does not feel limited in what he can convey by his choice of means.

I don't look at new painting to find anything out about painting. There are older people to look at that know more about painting. I mean it's got energy which is what you have when you've learned a lot. There are refinements to make; there are lots of things to figure out so it doesn't have that kind of bravado.

Brice Marden

Brice Marden describes his interest in the neo-expressionist painting as curiosity about what people are looking at. He believes the work to be an outgrowth of pop art and does not think the overwhelming presence of this kind of painting has as much to do with a major change in the direction of art as with a marketing phenomenon. There is always high quality figure painting being done—and artists will continue to do it—but the focus will

not always be on them. It is the market for art that demands the appearance of radical change.

Marden does not find the art itself interesting; nonetheless, his consideration of it has had some effect on his own painting. On the subject of imagistic paintings on panels he commented: "...you can put anything on a panel because a panel has a physical reality. You put everything together and it all works because they are all real things. So this calls into doubt the whole idea of painting on panels. You think you create new colors and things, but maybe it's too easy. How much of it is happening because of the physicality of the panels?"

Partially in response, Marden has recently been doing paintings on rectangular canvases in which the division of color is painted instead of being defined by separate panels.

When Marden says he is not interested in this art, he refers primarily to the subject matter conveyed through configuration. He feels that the introduction of images creates a more directed way of reading a painting. It is easier to look at, but usually the direction comes across as a limitation. Marden admits that to talk of subject matter in abstract painting is difficult because it is not always so evident. He did, however, begin to think of his subject matter differently around 1973 with the *Grove Group* paintings. He implied that he was responding to a sensation that second and third generation minimal art lacked expression. "The grid was getting to be as much of a cliché as the dead tree trunk in American thirties' surrealist stuff. I'm still working with it, but with ramifications of it. I'm trying to get more information into that space, whereas before there was probably just as much but expressed in a different way."

Marden says that illusion is "one of the primary things you get working on this abstract plane." It seems that it is his intention to complicate the sense of spatial illusion in the paintings.

Often Marden applies subject matter to his work through the titles. But he points out that "it's not just a matter of using subject matter as something referential to make a picture. There is always the problem of whether you can really get the idea of subject matter and the actual thing to be together."

Robert Mangold is the artist least familiar with the neo-expressionist painting because he lives outside New York City. One reason he left New

York was to get away from the art world, and now, besides following the work of a small number of artists, his involvement and reactions are those of a spectator who derives "a certain amount of amusement or interest" from what goes on. In fact, in one sense he is glad that the focus of attention is off what he is interested in. It gives him greater privacy and "you don't have all these people who don't know what else to do, doing minimal paintings."

More seriously, he enjoys aspects of the expressionist trend because "they challenge a certain situation." He says it is radical-looking art, although he questions what is being introduced that is *really* new, rather than new because we haven't been dealing with it for a while. "The majority of people at any given time are just doing what's in vogue... I don't know if anything really changes, or opens things up. I think it's true that certain kinds of painting become possible... What a few people do affects a lot of other people. I don't know if that's good or not. Otherwise they would be doing other kinds of derivative painting because that's the way people develop as artists."

He is less concerned about the stylistic aspects of the art than with a sense of the speed with which things can be promoted. "I think there's a danger when art becomes a quick commodity for consumption, sale and increased value... because it becomes an incredibly speculative situation where people profit from short skyrocketing careers. There's a certain kind of economic threat to the art world... Most careers that are worth anything are long careers usually, and people don't want to support an artist for even ten or fifteen years."

I carry inside of me this kind of feeling about what a great work of art is, and what a great work of art is supposed to transmit, and what you are supposed to feel in front of it. And I have this sense that I want the work to contain everything. In making it, I want to create this feeling in me. I know that if it affects me, if it makes me have a certain strong response, then it's a success.

Robert Mangold

Mangold stresses that he does not relate to art in terms of whether it is abstract or not. He finds as much boring abstraction around as other kinds of painting, and has tried to force change in his own work at certain

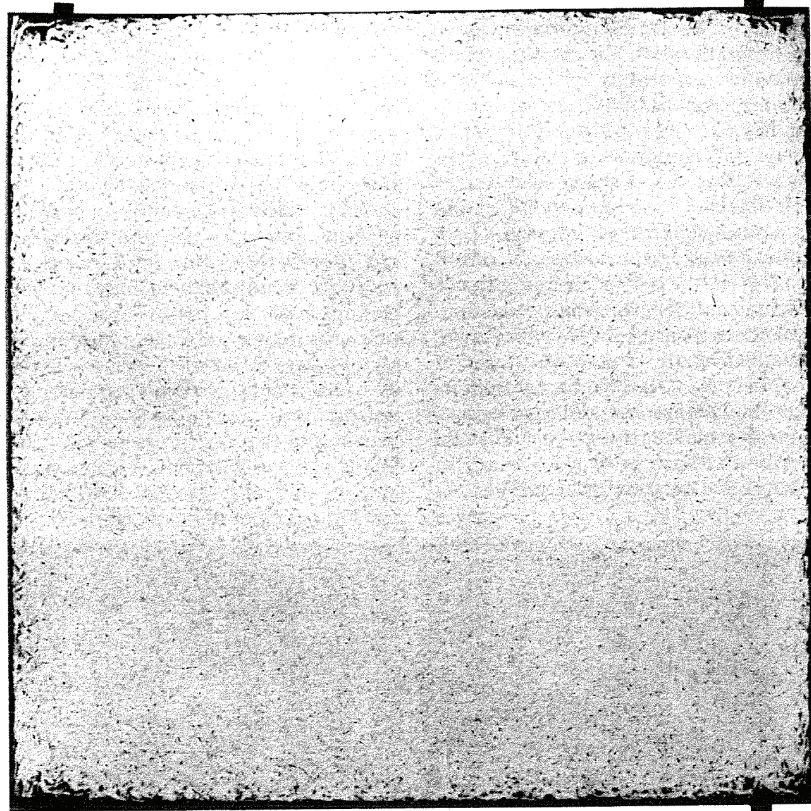
points. In the early seventies, he shifted from serial works to individual paintings in which color played a great role. More recently, in his x-and y-shaped paintings, he has been attempting to make more complicated paintings by expanding the structural elements in a way which allows for the inclusion of more than one color. He is not, however, considering doing spatial paintings and wants to keep his paintings flat with the image held to the surface. Mangold does not think his paintings are more intellectual or less emotional than other kinds of art. He looks for a certain combination of tension and simplicity in structure, which can be enhanced by color. "I'm somehow involved in the monumentality of art, and if I'm expressing something, that's what it is."

I think that abstract painting is becoming more exciting in contrast to neo-expressionism, by force of survival. The mental concentration that it takes to share an abstract painting is being challenged and the work is becoming more bold and demanding.

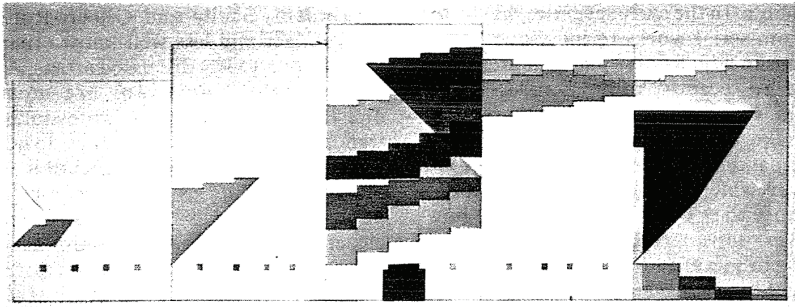
Lynn Umlauf

Umlauf, Scully and Gilbert-Rolfe are younger and less well-known than the four previously discussed artists. As a result, their positions are more directly affected by the neo-expressionist trend. As one might expect, they do not have ambivalent attitudes toward it.

Lynn Umlauf is not a geometric painter and her work has always been closer to a more expressionist than minimal mode. But this kind of expressionism would be closer to abstract expressionism, which incorporates an insistence on maintaining the integrity of the paintings' objectness. She takes a positive interest in the neo-expressionist trend "because [it] is leading away from geometry and into more spontaneous and associational form-color-space relationships." Her comments do not suggest any objection to the use of images as such, but she is more interested in the techniques or methods, usually the "abstracting" aspects that some of the artists use. Of Julian Schnabel's paintings she says: "The images I see aren't interesting *per se*, but in the way they are melded together as objects, with the artist using every possible subject at his disposal." She



Robert Ryman, *Paramount*, 1981.
Oil on linen, metal. 88 x 84". Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York.



Allen Furbeck, *Foramen Magnum/Denali*, 1982.
Oil on linen, 54 x 188".

does not like the illustrative, "borrowed" subject matter in other neo-expressionist painting and sees it as irrelevant rhetoric. She questions whether much of the painting will survive. "Will the young Italian, American and German art transcend this initial scrawl and rediscovery of the self that will come with maturity? I know each of the individual artists is already mature, but this urge to celebrate primitive instincts is reactionary and the real world is more complex."

Umlauf, like the other abstract painters, emphasizes the importance of a "search for more original form and color." She does sense more freedom in the situation today but also feels challenged by it. Painting cannot be held back now and she thinks abstract painting is becoming bolder and more thoughtful. Her own has changed over the last few years; she uses different materials and more intense color, and her painting has become more gestural.

Sean Scully sees neo-expressionism as offering "an alternative culture which asserts itself in times of crisis—when there is an absence of belief in the future." He views it as a popular, secondary art. "At the moment, representational means are no longer appropriate for making major art" such as Newman's *Stations of the Cross*. "It seems to me the only thing you can do

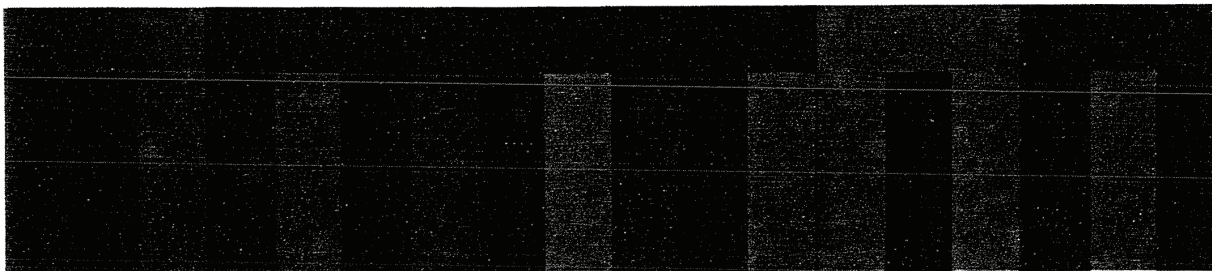
formally [in representational painting] is wallow around in history.... It's not like T.S. Eliot's idea of taking the responsibility for history and dragging it forward an inch." More positively, Scully is interested in the use of materials and large scale in much of the neo-expressionist painting. He also believes that these artists have injected energy back into painting. Abstract art had become hermetic and representational painting is "capable of restoring subject matter and guts to painting, and relating it to life ... which is what it needs."

Like Mangold, Scully is glad that the focus has currently moved away from abstract painting. It removes a pressure to conform, and allows for exciting things to happen. His own painting has changed noticeably over last few years. Scully continues to paint stripes but is now more concerned with subject matter than with the formal aspects of his paintings. He is trying to incorporate more meaning and greater complication, though he does admit to feeling limited in what he can convey at times. Abstract art is less specific in certain ways, but Scully seems to agree with Marden that the specificity of imagistic painting "does not allow the painting to express things far bigger." Scully believes abstract art can express more significant spiritual aspirations

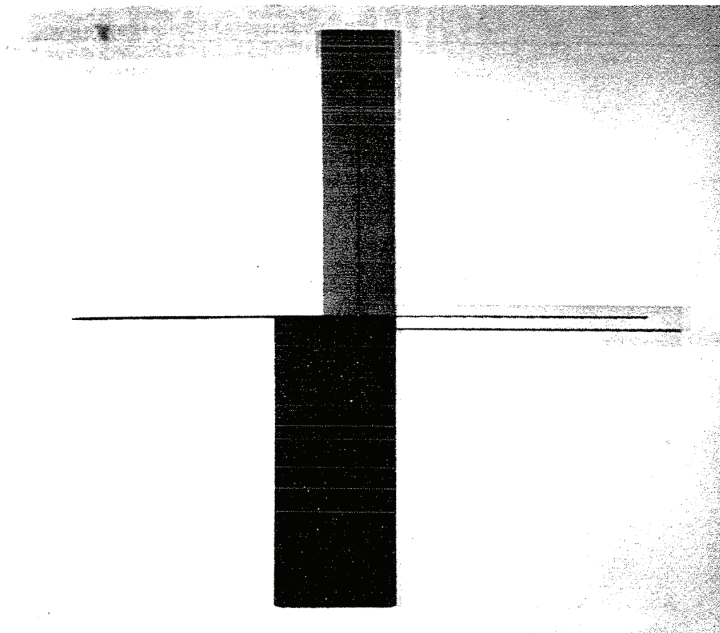
than representational art. It is still a young tradition, however, and "what it is able to represent is reflected by its youth." As abstraction progresses it will get broader and be able to incorporate more evocative and suggestive connotations. "Nobody challenges its religious power, but they challenge its narrowness. I don't think it will always be that way; it should become broader and broader... And that is what I intend to try and do."

Like Scully, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe considers the neo-expressionist painting as a "lower level of cultural phenomenon." He associates it with popular music, and on the subject of emotional content he comments: "I don't think neo-expressionist painting has any particular claim on emotionalism. I think the trouble with expressionism, both neo and original, is that it's limited to one sort of hysterical pitch. Music has all the possibilities from a shout to a whisper at its disposal, which is why expressionism is always boring and rather uninteresting."

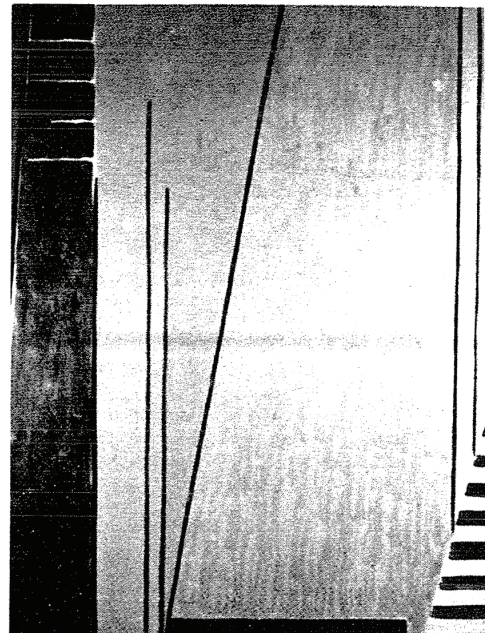
In his opinion, the notion of the personal has become "totally devalued by being used as a prop for all sorts of banal interests in peoples' private autobiographies—a gibberish preoccupation with the personal in the recent past of American art." Like Marden, he sees much of the painting being done as derived from pop art; as representing yet another variation of the notion of the ready-made. The ready-made in this case is the stretched or the pictorial rectangle, and the "presumption is that you can put anything into it.... These people are not trying to play the violin but are just using the violin in such a way that its potential as an instrument is merely being applied for something else." He suggests that it is "hypothetically interesting to have a very self-conscious, dispassionate interest in expressionism, exploring neo-expressionism from a different point of view.... But my point is that the artists



Brice Marden, *Frieze II*, 1982.
Mixed media. Courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York.



Robert Mangold, + Painting, 1982.
Acrylic on canvas, aluminum, 120 x 127".



Linda Levit, Untitled, 1982.
Oil on canvas, 66 x 52".

aren't like this, and the art doesn't work."

As far as the development of his own work is concerned, Gilbert-Rolfe says he has learned from minimalism and direct antecedents such as Newman. His painting, however, has become "a work of greater explicit complexity" which is in a sense opposed to the kind of "imminent complexity" of minimal art. Asked about the subject matter of his painting, he explained that in abstract painting one did not think of subject matter "as being part of the operation," as in representational paintings. Again using a musical analogy he explained: "The difference between abstract painting and representational painting is the difference between writing music and writing songs. In songs, the musical dimension of the work as a whole becomes in some way subordinate to a literary thematic. This does not happen, in any sort of direct way, in music."

Thus, Gilbert-Rolfe thinks more in terms of generalized thematics than subject matter. "The sense or feeling that I would want to place at the center of my work would be of conflict... conflict as a necessary pre-condition of more or less any kind of coherence.... Conflict in the sense that in any argument or any description one has to identify contradictions. One can't characterize any event in historical life

except in terms of contradictions, which even when resolved don't cease to be contradictions. And I think that sense of meaning or wholeness... through mutually exclusive forces which are not simply opposites, is the kind of conflict which interests me and which I think could be said to characterize my work."

Linda Levit, James Muehleemann and Allen Furbeck are approximately of the same generation as the neo-expressionists. In one sense, because they are young and their work is not well-known, these painters are in a more flexible position than the others mentioned here. They might conceivably be more open to and encouraged by the change. On the other hand, as abstract painters among contemporaries who seem to be overwhelmingly neo-expressionist, they may find themselves in a more vulnerable position and face greater doubts about their work. Their responses vary.

The kind of emotion that I feel about things and about what I want to do in my work is different. I'm trying to address spiritual things so I think the feeling I have about paintings is intensely emotional because painting has to represent the most important things of life....It's not the same kind of emotion felt by somebody who paints a barking dog.

Sean Scully

Furbeck, the youngest of the three, was working primarily within a geometric tradition until about three years ago. He then began courses at the Arts Students League to learn to paint in a traditional, academic mode. He continues to make abstract paintings, but does admit to re-evaluating some "comfortable assumptions" he was working with. Levit, also a geometric painter, has reconsidered some aspects of a reductivist approach. She believes neo-expressionism has stimulated new possibilities for painting and her own work has "loosened up in terms of paint application and forms." Neither Levit nor Furbeck, however, have been directly influenced by neo-expressionism. Both object to the kind of images used and the way they are dealt with. They feel that the juxtaposition of images quoted from various sources is made without subtlety or resonance in means.

Muehleemann, who has been painting longer than Levit or Furbeck, makes all-over, textured paintings. His work too has changed over the last few years to incorporate more color and space. Muehleemann appreciates the renewed interest in painting triggered by neo-expressionism, but does not believe it has "opened things up." He suggests that most artists were aware that painting was in difficult straits and that the neo-expressionists just departed in the most obvious and accessible



Michael Goldberg, *Untitled*, 1983.
Mixed media, 80 x 60".

direction. But he feels that an ambition to make paintings that will hold their own next to Cézanne's is not easily fulfilled.

The sense of dissatisfaction with a reductivist approach to painting recurs throughout these discussions. For the older artists, it seems to have arisen earlier in the seventies and for the younger generation, it is a more recent feeling which clearly parallels that of their neo-expressionist contemporaries. It is a feeling that is evidenced in changes, or rather, in a course toward greater complexity, manifest in all of their works. Of course, the move to painting aggressive, disjointed images on velvet, and Marden's switch to painting on rectangular surfaces in which he draws the edges, are hardly the same. Nonetheless, Marden's deci-

sion is significant in that it suggests both a parallel—though much subtler—move away from minimalism, as well as pointing to a major difference in the approaches to painting or, more specifically, to subject matter. For Marden, the emphasis is on revelation through means; subject is expressed through relationships of color, line and space. Thus, he can paint an historical theme full of emotional content such as the Annunciation, and incorporate the traditional iconography in a way that makes a convincing, powerful and relevant painting.¹ The subject is not illustrated or directly referred to through images, but suggested by feelings described through color and movement.

The points of view presented here are not shocking or even unexpected. Ryman's attitude toward the "ball and

When someone like me is asked what they think of this stuff they have to say, not very much, because it really does represent an approximation of something like painting or art in general to the condition of popular music. And popular music is all very well, but there are a lot of things that it doesn't do. The same is true of neo-expressionist work. There are a lot of things about art, primarily intellectual complexity and deep feeling, which it is simply not capable of addressing, and as such it's not very interesting as art.

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

chain" of symbolism and narrative is familiar. For the most part, these artists are stating again their belief in a formalist approach. It is this formalism, so ingrained in our understanding of modernism, that the writers on neo-expressionism and postmodernism call into question. What was once considered a radical approach is labelled as conservative. When asked about the political significance of neo-expressionism, only Goldberg and Scully answered directly. They maintained the belief that representational painting reflects conservatism. But they too would agree with the general opinion that political significance is hard to measure in neo-expressionist or abstract painting. Rather, what these discussions do point out is a difference in attitudes toward history. A simple comment such as wanting to paint as well as Cézanne suggests the acceptance of the modern tradition which demands that meaning and feeling be expressed in a way which incorporates that tradition in a new or different way. We have here a reaffirmation of painting, but not one that comments on art and life in a negative or cynical way. These artists maintain a positive belief in the possibilities of revelation and profound feeling expressed through painting. ■

1. See Roberta Smith, "Brice Marden," in *Brice Marden: Paintings, Drawing and Prints 1975-80*, catalogue for the exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery, 8 May-21 June 1981