

And Still They Ask . . . But Is It Art?

By Holly Cole

In 1971, I attended an opening in Amsterdam, the recollection of which still amuses me. The reception boasted the usual platters of hors d'oeuvres and tureens of punch, smartly dressed aristocrats and a more bohemian looking contingent of artists, complete with paint-spattered shoes. On the wall were the neatly typed labels indicating the order of the works by number and year of execution. All that was missing were the works of art themselves. Or were they?

Years later I was taken by a friend to a show of Photorealist paintings in New York. The paintings were meticulously rendered street scenes, complete with cars passing, reflections in store windows, streetlights, and people going by with briefcases and bags of purchases. Large-scale, hand-painted photographs, I thought, of the type of unremarkable scene which people in cities see every day of their lives. Or do they?

On the Boulder campus this month are two exhibits which offer a few more examples of art in the 70s. At the Henderson Museum is "Pictures," a collection of work by five artists who live and work in New York. At the fine arts gallery is an impromptu show by 15 CU undergraduates, called "They'll Miss Me When I'm Gone."

Confronted with the abundance of styles and media and images evident in contemporary art, one wonders which, if any, can be called typical. Perhaps it is just this abundance and variety which is most representative of this decade's work. Pluralism, eclecticism and versatility were aspects which Ken Iwamasa, assistant professor of fine arts, stresses as important in any discussion of contemporary art and artists.

Artists differ widely in their choice of media — from traditional oils and metals to industrial enamels, car bumpers or even a stuffed goat. Aesthetic concerns range from the demanding formal discipline of minimal abstraction to the indeterminacy of some conceptual pieces — in which the appearance of the product is secondary, even nonexistent. In 1971, for example, Vito Acconci did a piece which consisted of his standing at the end of an abandoned pier for 29 nights, one hour each night; 26 other artists did their own versions of "Pier 18." A visit to the two exhibits currently on view gives a taste of the diversity which Iwamasa perceives and raises questions about the often enigmatic intentions of the artists behind the work.

"Pictures" presents a selection of provocative works by Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith. Although the choice of media and imagery are quite varied — ranging from phonograph records to fluorescent tempera on graph paper — there is a cohesiveness in tone and similarity of interest which makes the grouping a natural one. In the accompanying catalogue, Douglas Crimp describes their work as part of a recent trend away from abstraction and toward a renewed interest in representation. For much of the imagery, Crimp asserts, these artists reject modernist conventions and turn instead "... to those of other art forms more directly concerned with representation — film and photography, most particularly — and even to the most debased of our cultural conventions — television and picture newspapers, for example."

The work of Sherrie Levine and Philip Smith reminded me of yet another element of popular culture: comic strips.

Levine exhibits a series of 31 separate drawings on graph paper which, at first viewing, I mistook for computer printout

sheets. The cast of her "Son and Lovers" consists of heads of Washington, Lincoln, John Kennedy, an anonymous woman, a couple and a dog. In each drawing, two silhouetted heads confront one another in a variety of combinations and relative scale. An historic dialogue is doubtless taking place here — yet no balloons rise from the famous heads, and the text remains a mystery.

Philip Smith presents an abundance of imagery on his large canvas panels which are covered with sketches in pencil and oil pastel. The images, all about the same size, parade solemnly across the panels like Egyptian hieroglyphics. The subjects are easily recognizable. We have, in sequence: a man carrying a banner, a Japanese puppeteer, a girl holding a parakeet, two views of a parachutist, two children waving streamers, and so on in orderly progression. The only catch is: What does it all mean? The plot line of Smith's pictographs remains as inaccessible as the whispered exchange across centuries initiated by "Sons and Lovers."

Robert Longo's work, the most visually eloquent in the show, draws directly from the world of Hollywood. A graceful sculpture in cast aluminum depicts a man arched in space, hit from behind by an invisible bullet. The figure's source is a still from Fassbinder's movie "The American Soldier." Nearby, a reclining aluminum dog (dead or dying?) bears the sentimental caption, "Say good-bye to Hollywood' true measure, true star, in every living room of every house of every family across the nation."

Tony Brauntuch exhibits a triptych of silkscreen prints, each featuring a rather unremarkable drawing on a blood-red ground. The caption, "1 2 3," conveys no further information — but upon reading the catalogue, one discovers a clue which lends the prints a fascination they could not otherwise inspire — the drawings are all by Hitler.

The most entertaining images in the show are the "pictures" of Jack Goldstein: photographs, eight film shorts, and several pairs of records (one set to play, the other to view). Unlike the captionless comics of Levine and Smith, the titles of Goldstein's records describe their contents forthrightly. "The Six-minute Drown," "Three Felled Trees," "Two Fencers" and "A German Shepherd" were some of my favorites.

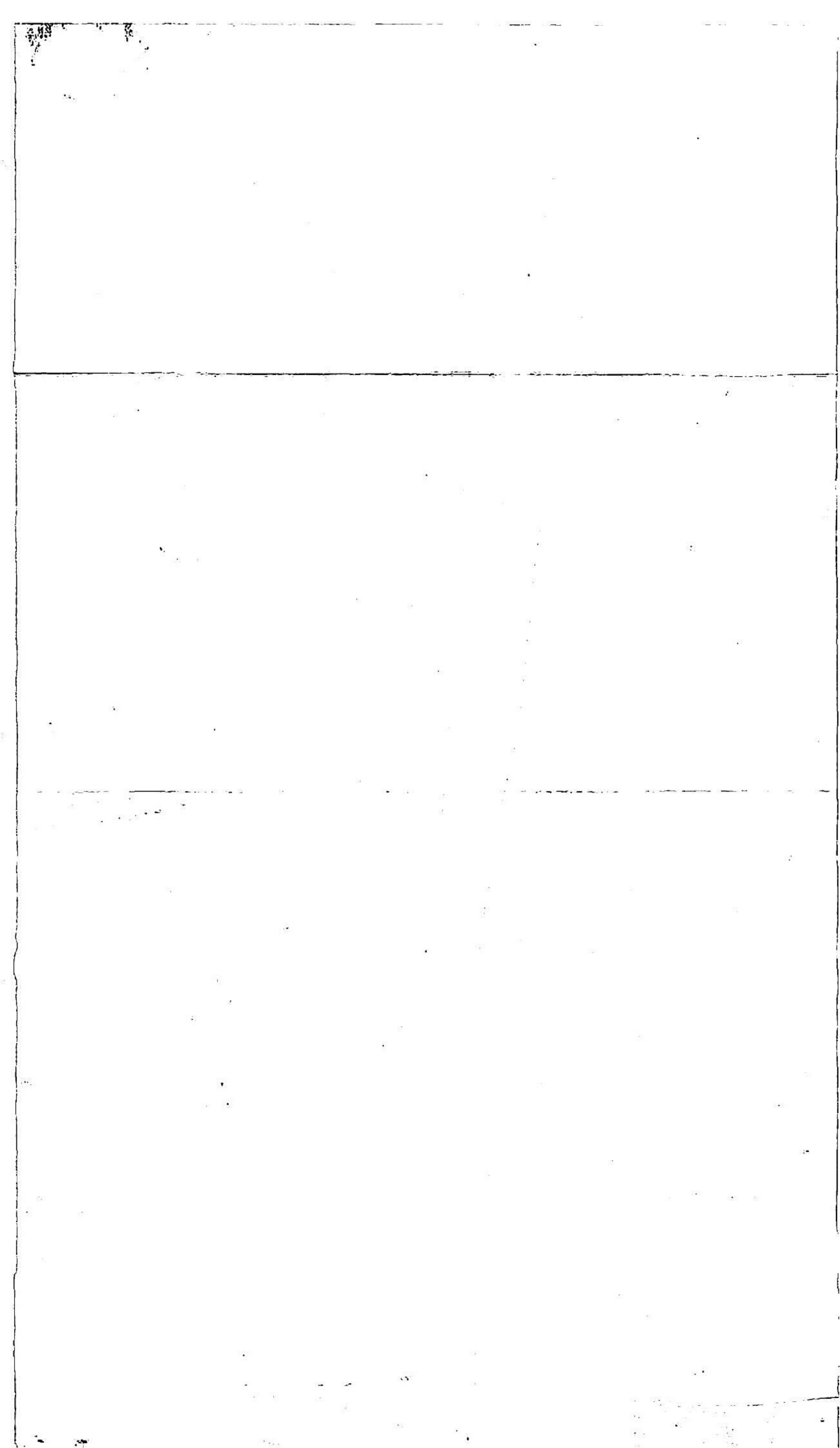
To anyone trained by long hours of television viewing, the sound effects of "The Six-minute Drown" summon from an obedient memory-bank visions of a man fighting the waves ... going under ... struggling to the surface ... choking ... images as vivid (or more so) as those which hang on the gallery walls. There is a limit to the continuity of imagination, however: after a few of the allotted six minutes I began seeing a different image altogether. Superimposed upon my drowning victim, I envisioned another man — fully dressed and quite dry — gurgling and choking into a microphone.

One of Goldstein's film shorts, entitled "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer," is introduced by the MGM lion — a vision as familiar to our eyes as movie soundtracks are to our ears. This lion, though, does not roar and discreetly disappear: he continues to roar for two long minutes, with an almost hypnotic effect upon the viewer. This psychological effect, plus the inventive, free-associative state of mind induced by indecipherable picture stories, were as memorable as the more immediate impact of Longo's aluminum pieces.

As a whole, the show is polished, ironic and thought-provoking. There is a sense of distance between the creator of the work and the viewer; these images are not easily

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approached. The detachment seems to be deliberate. Brauntuch's graphic works, for example, are not so much an expression of experience as a comment upon experience, or even a comment upon something experienced secondhand.

Crimp sees this remoteness as a reflection of the impact mass media has upon us. "To an ever greater extent our experience is governed by pictures — pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these pictures, firsthand experience begins to retreat, to seem more and more trivial." Much of the material provided by these secondhand sources, however, is more trivial yet, and lacks the compelling reality of personal experience. It also lacks the emotional intensity; once the original experience has made its way through the distortion of the media and the artist's perception of the media, it is drained not only of its emotional content but also of any original significance. Goldstein's still of a barking dog from the film "Shane" (which contains lengthy footage of a dog barking and nothing else) says little if anything about dogs. Instead it becomes a comment upon itself.

In work so seemingly devoid of inherent meaning, the opacity itself becomes a central element. One wonders about the motives of an artist who is so thoroughly obscure. Is he trying to reach the general public? Or is the work meant only for the select portion of the arts community engaged in similar pursuits? To conclude that something is incomprehensible because one lacks the vocabulary to decipher it can be quite misleading.

In 1969 Marjorie Strider did a piece called "Street Works, I." Her description of the work — "30 empty picture frames were hung in the area, to create instant paintings and to call the attention of passers-by to their environment" — clearly

conveys her desire to bring art to the public. I would guess that her piece was wasted upon the typical man or woman in the street, and that one would furthermore be hard pressed to convince such a person that this was art designed with them in mind.

"They'll Miss Me When I'm Gone" presents works that are more apparently accessible to the viewer. The refreshing juxtaposition of styles and mediums which characterizes the show provides a different set of perspectives on contemporary art from the more austere "Pictures."

In one corner "hangs" a piece by Elizabeth Baranick, consisting of several large rocks (boulders?) suspended by sturdy ropes from the steel beams above. Underneath this installation, which might be termed an indoor earthwork, the artist has strewn some rough gravel. On the adjacent wall hangs a Superrealist painting by Werner Hoeflich, as meticulous and delicate in its approach as the hanging rocks are primitive and direct.

Extending the range of styles are an audience participation sculpture entitled "Cop a Feel;" a duet of formal, abstract drawings; a standing sculpture in wood, and several works in oil and acrylic. There are a variety of montage/collage works: of comic book cutouts, shattered LPs, or 64 intaglio prints. Andi O'Connor contributes a pair of photographs, one playful, the other abstract and evocative.

Iwamasa, who provided the original impetus for the show, spoke of the personalized nature of student work and of contemporary art in general. Rather than feeling compelled by the structure and conventions of any particular "ism," artists are more apt to choose styles and mediums which most closely correspond to the expression of their individual experience. Perhaps the importance of this individualized statement is typical of the 70s generally: this is the decade of self-improvement, of doing one's own thing, of fascination with self-discovery.

An attitude of tolerance seems to go along with this in the art world, a respecting of personal differences. Thus one can

wander (as I did) into a collective studio and see four people working in styles that could hardly be more diverse. I spoke with one student at work on an austere wall construction, who mentioned Superrealism and commented, in effect, "I respect the technique and like the work — it just isn't the approach for me." Doubtless there exist critics and artists who deny the validity of different styles (Photorealism has been denounced as a "triumph of mediocrity," "a visual soap opera," "incredibly dead.") it certainly wasn't the norm among students I spoke to at the gallery and the fine arts building.

This embrace of the validity of pluralism might be typical of the arts community, but the reaction of people outside that community is often a different matter. One morning I spent a few hours at the "Pictures" exhibit, hoping to speak to some other visitors about their response to the show. I picked a slow morning; the one gentleman I accosted was in a big rush, explaining as he breezed out the door, "I'm on my way to the football game, so I don't have much time to look at it . . . and I'm not an authority on art . . . so I just won't express it." Express what? I wondered. Sue Ray, one of the student aides who greets visitors in the Henderson lobby, told of a woman who was quite concerned as to whether the University paid for the show; "'cause if they did, it was sure a waste of money."

Barbara Lane, another work-aide and also an art student, said that most visitors made a quick circuit and left, but a few spoke to her. One woman asked, curiously, "Is this a dance studio? I just wondered, with the records, and the pictures on the walls . . ." Another person came up, after viewing the show briefly, and demanded, "Why is this Art?? Would you tell me why this is Art?"

The "Pictures" exhibit will be on view through Oct. 7. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday, from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. The undergraduate show can be seen through next Saturday, and the gallery (by the office in the fine arts building) is open Monday through Friday, 8 A.M. to 5 P.M., except during lunch.