

This Not-so-Seventies Show

by Peter Plagens

The 1970s are edging in on being forty years old. In a living, breathing human being, that's middle age, and in contemporary art, where the parent-to-progeny time span is about five years, that's a couple of handfuls of generations. (If you're talking *Artforum* covers, six months is closer to the mark.) But "the Seventies" sometimes seem as flat and distant as the Dust Bowl. Maybe they appear in retrospect that way to me because I spent them in Los Angeles, supporting my own painting teaching art to the hordes of once and future flower children who passed through a giant state university in a distant, ennui-laden suburb of Los Angeles that was, by political miracle or curse (your choice), actually within that city's limits. The days were hot, the air opaque, the landscape banal, the market down, the galleries on the hip side of the Hollywood Hills dwindling, and a sense of the moment already being a footnote filled the lulling atmosphere. "The Sixties"—as manifested in the work of the light & space artists, the Hollywood pop guys, and the "fetish finish" obsessives (all those categories overlapped)—felt closer, more urgent. Even the *New York* 1960s (Warhol, Lichtenstein, et al.) appeared to most of us as sharp-focus foreground. Our own time lay in the background, fuzzed out by the smog of cultural epilogue.

There are, of course, other ways of looking at that benighted decade. As the art critic Doug Harvey writes:

In the early 1970s, many artists became fed up with the overblown critical rhetoric surrounding post-painterly abstraction, a term coined by über-critic Clement Greenberg (as the title of a show at LACMA) for that work encompassing such non-Pop post-abstract expressionist painting styles as minimalism and Color Field. As the psychological, spiritual, figurative and narrative content was systematically removed from visual art during this period, the arguments in its defense became increasingly grandiloquent and

elitist, and it was that, along with the cramped possibilities and ungenerous aesthetics of minimalist abstraction, that begat a reactionary torrent of works wallowing in sensuality, complexity, inclusiveness and humor.

[“Pattern & Decoration, Pattern & Decoration, Pattern & Decoration,” *LA Weekly*, September 18, 2003]

Or, the same sentiment in the looking-back gush of a press release: “Art in the seventies was distinguished by its pluralism. The 1960’s “isms” seemed played out; pop art, minimalism and conceptualism were established; media based work began to command art world attention only toward the end of the decade; and new painting, commonly labeled neo-expressionism, emerged only in the next decade. The situation was open. Anything seemed possible.”

In the autumn of my years, I can see that both the antiheroic and heroic views of the Seventies have considerable truth to them. With Minimalism having passed into recent history as, in the words of the late John Coplans, “the last of the court styles” (i.e., any decent artist had to contend with it—accept it, reject it, but contend nevertheless) and photorealism, the avant-garde had finally been academicized. (A date?—how about the opening of a new campus of the formerly training-ground-for-Disney-animators and now academy-for-rebels, Cal Arts in 1970.) There wasn’t much of what the great dealer Irving Blum likes to call “a sense of urgency.” T’was the original “big chill”—stay cool, do what you want, lots of exhibiting artists teaching in art departments and art schools all over the place, pick up that MFA, detritus and *theorizing* about detritus make almost automatically decent shows, score a teaching job yourself, and maybe get lucky enough to grab one of those National Endowment for the Arts fellowships—government money directly to the artist, no strings!

Women artists were getting—on account of their own militancy and not some sudden male largesse—a better shot, but minority artists were still relatively scare enough to give us white guys a creepy, subaudible feeling of being over-privileged. That in itself—spattered, long-haired makers of non-Rockwell/Remington sorts of art that still drew laughs and/or scorn in polite society feeling like they might be having it a little too

easy—showed how far we had come since Jack Pollock pee'd in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace (or, for that matter, since Andy Warhol's soup-can paintings went on view at the Ferus Gallery in 1962 and the gallery across the street putting a pyramid of actuals in its front window with a sign saying, "Get the real thing for 29 cents!").

In a strange sort of way, the exclamation point put on the prolonged "death" of Abstract Expressionism by the suicide in 1970 of Mark Rothko also took some of the steam out of the momentum of Pop Art. As much as it was a reinsertion and militant celebration of "low" popular culture within the precincts of "high" art, Pop was also a refutation of the tortured, histrionic loner-genius of Abstract Expressionism, emotionally flailing away in his cold-water loft, expelling his existential soul onto the canvas in the most heated, physically direct way possible—"action painting." Pop was passive-aggressively cool, deadpan, and dismissive of the idea that artists had to, as the psychologists say, "act out" in order to make art. On the West Coast, the quasi-Pop painter Billy Al Bengston had said that the time had come for artists in southern California to—if memory serves—wash their hands, put on clean trousers, throw off that San Francisco sensibility (i.e., the Abstract Expressionist heritage of Rothko and Clyfford Still, who'd taught briefly at what's now the San Francisco Art Institute), and be professionals. By the time the Seventies rolled around, artists exchanging psychodrama for, to use the current academic buzzword, their "practice," was no longer news. To oversimplify the situation, the most salient characteristic of the art world in the Seventies was that there was no longer much of anything to react *against*. Artists may have been, as Harvey says, "fed up," but they weren't stylistically or critically oppressed. So they didn't so much push back as spread out.

How did they spreadeth? Let us count [some of] the ways: In 1971, Chris Burden had himself shot in the upper arm by a .22 caliber rifle, and Robert Smithson created *Spiral Jetty*; in 1972, James Turrell started work on his *Roden Crater* project in Arizona and Michael Heizer did the same with his giant *City* earthwork in Nevada; in 1973, Dorothea Rockburne installed *Drawing Which Makes Itself* in the Bykert Gallery, and Al Ruppertsberg delivered a lecture on Houdini while escaping from a straight jacket; in 1974, the art group Ant Farm installed *Cadillac Ranch* by the side of a highway outside of Amarillo, Texas, and Joseph Beuys performed *I Like America and America Likes Me*;

and in 1975, Carolee Schneeman withdrew from her body, through her vagina, a scroll, and Howard Fried filmed himself taking a golf lesson in *The Burghers of Fort Worth*.

Meanwhile, chatter about “the death of painting”—which was presumed during the 1970s to have either dead-ended itself in great gray gridded abstractions, retrenched itself in achingly elaborate *trompe-l’oeil* (whose mosaic-like paint application was critically repackaged as computer-like “information”), or simply expanded into a branch of sculpture—reached a fever pitch...or, since hardly anything was fevered in the Seventies, a pitch, period.

The Seventies were, in short, a deceptively tough time to be an artist, especially an artist committed to the studio, to an unironic (which does not mean dour or dogmatic) approach to modernism, and to a certain human scale modesty, or at least an avoidance of too much hubris. And to maintain being an artist—let alone a serious artist—in the multiple art-world lifetimes that have passed before our eyes since the 1970s. The last thirty-five years or so have offered artists innumerable temptations to “tech it up,” to expand exponentially the physical product, to answer, in effect, the siren song of being glamorously and (inevitably) superficially “21st century.” And the carrot of temptation has carried with it a market corollary of the stick; as a painter-friend of mine in Los Angeles presciently said to me a long time ago, “It’s easier for a dealer to find new artists for old clients, than new clients for old artists.”

Although their work has, as it naturally would, changed since the mid-1970s, none of the nine artists in this exhibition—Cynthia Carlson, Donna Dennis, David Deutsch, Martha Diamond, Hermine Ford, Mike Glier, Lois Lane, Thomas Lawson, Kim McConnell—has succumbed to the skew of temptation or the distortion of the stick. And although the work of none of these artists is what anybody would call arcane, a thread of, if not art-for-art’s-sake, at least art for the artists’ sake runs through this show. The spirit of all this is, not surprisingly, beautifully articulated by one of them, the painter Thomas Lawson. In a lecture that was published in 2006,* Lawson said (and I’ve taken the liberty of condensing part of it to what’s really pertinent here):

I found that what I wanted to look at was actually this painting of Picasso (*Green Still Life*). And the surrealist rooms,

which are now expanded and dominating because in all those years since 1975 art has very clearly taken the side of Duchamp and I found that I was really sick of that...

So I was looking at painting as a strategy and I thought of each painting as analogous to a very fast song by the Ramones, something like that, a very simple idea that could be executed very quickly with minimum fuss, minimum of tools, just done you know essentially in half an afternoon or something....

More recently I've moved back into the studio and begun to think of the work, not exactly a private enterprise, but an enterprise that has to do with thinking consistently through a set of problems and ideas without so much concern for public....

...the significance of having a studio or not having a studio. To me it's absolutely crucial, I don't actually any longer understand how you work without one.

If you understand the shift in empathy from Picasso to Duchamp and back again, and read "studio" as a state of mind rather than just a physical place, Lawson's plainspoken ode to a kind of responsible, non-self-indulgent, interiority is clear. And that, to me, is the real subject of *That Was Then, This Is Now*.

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