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New York Scene

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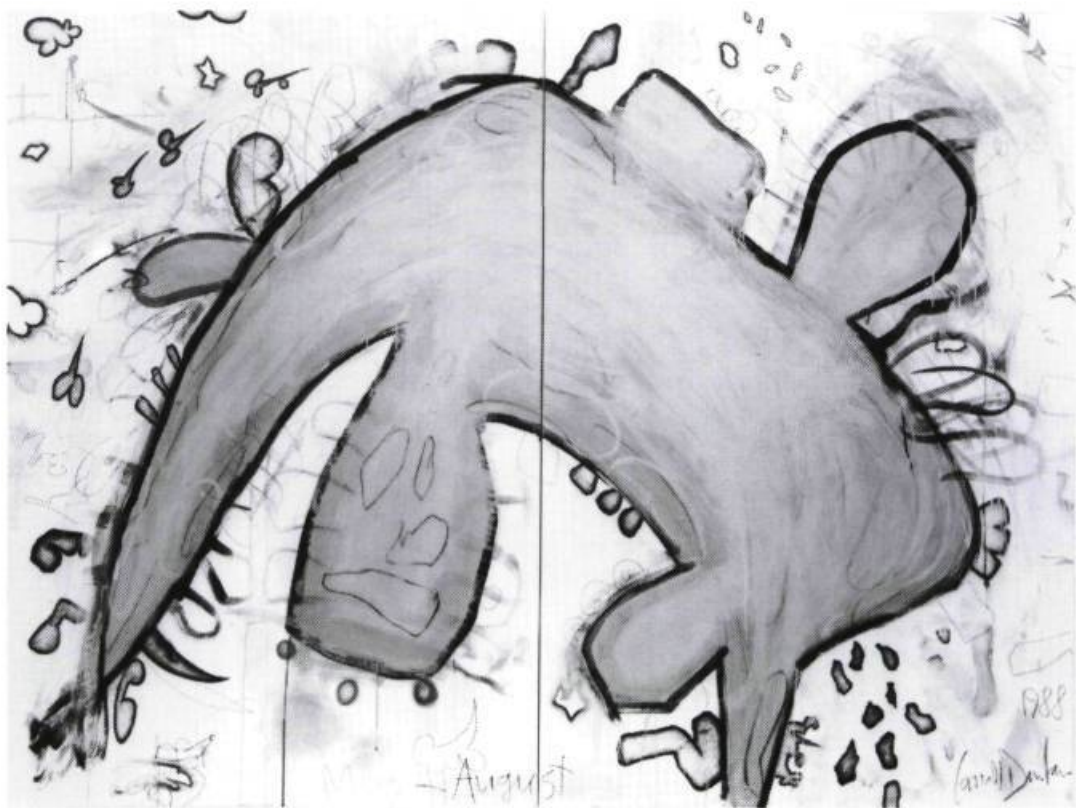
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Carroll Dunham, *Orange Shape*, 1988.
Mixed media on ragboard, 2 panels; 60 x 80 in.
Photo : Ken Schles. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, NYC

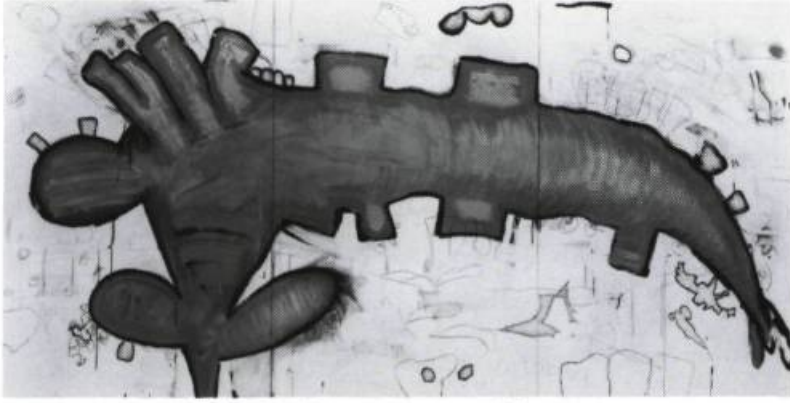
Carroll Dunham, Sonnabend Gallery,
through February 25, 1989 —

The hidden agenda of biomorphic or representational abstraction, beyond the recapitulation of life forms in abstract painting, is a recapitulation of the mind. These psychological underpinnings are particularly evident in Carroll Dunham's current work at Sonnabend : eight paintings plus a series of drawings in which large, blob-like figures are foregrounded on a field of Twombly-esque scrawls and notations.

Dunham is previously known for his wood grain paintings, which placed him among contemporaries such as Terry Winters, Gary Stephan and Ross Bleckner, and among younger painters such as George Condo, Lydia Dona, Bill Komoski and Willy Heeks, as a figurative abstractionist rooted in the morphologies of nature. Dunham's former plywood paintings, with their accentuated delineation of grain and knot, were optical

enigmas blinded by science : drenched in illusion, déjà vu (or *presque vu*), and in the detritus of drug store psychology (Rorschach tests, eye charts). His new paintings also invoke the blandishments and iconography of pseudo science, but through the exploration of a singular form, a dynamic and expansive shape. Dunham has, at least temporarily, abandoned his encyclopedic appraisal of diverse styles and effects in favor of an *idée fixe*.

The large, single colored protagonists that squirm and squiggle across the *tableaux* evoke Philip Guston as well as Dr. Seuss. They are cartoonlike, with a dark outline that is unevenly filled with color. These grotesque vegetal/mammalian forms, somewhat pornographic in their effulgence of flesh, evince a polymorphous playfulness of bulges, lobes, loops and other epidermal appendages that seem engaged in some sexual cataclysm, apocalyptic struggle, or perhaps



Carroll Dunham, *Blue Shape*, 1988.
Mixed media on ragboard on panel, 3 panels; 60 x 120 in.
Photo : Ken Schles. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, NYC

in a deflation of circumstances. Surrounding the protagonists are an elegantly distressed field of scribbles, half rendered notations and graffiti-like markings. If a narrative can be implied, this text is seemingly expelled in the wake of the leviathan, like so many angry exclamations and asides. This dense field of markings recalls Cy Twombly, but is also derived from Dunham's earlier work, and suggests scraps of laboratory notes that were somehow instrumental in giving birth to the beast within. Weird science, indeed.

At the risk of obvious biography, Dunham is recently a father, and his current tendency towards a childlike playfulness and polymorphous exaggeration of form might reflect family circumstances. But however, one accounts for the genesis of these (pro-) tuberous shapes in his work, Dunham's current paintings are masterful. Executed on paper, which is then mounted on panels, they retain the immediacy and volatility of creation associated with drawing, while allowing a multiplicity of impressions and interpretations to be garnered from his singular exposition of shape. As in the famous dialogue from *Hamlet* : "See you cloud that looks very like a ...", the mind's eye of the viewer travels over Dunham's blimp-like extravaganzas and creates its own cosmologies.

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***Diagrams and Surrogates*, Shea & Beker Gallery,
through February 25, 1989 —**

According to curator Saul Ostrow's overriding thesis in *Diagrams and Surrogates*¹, the work of Carroll Dunham (although not included in the exhibition) could be classified both as a diagram ("those paintings in which the elements are ordered to make a reference to the language of the abstract") and surrogate ("abstract forms used to stand in for recognizable imagery"). We might substitute "formal" or "interior" for "diagram" and "psychological" or "exterior" for "surrogate" and arrive at a dialectic on the sources and intentions of abstraction that has previously monitored its investigation. Does abstraction proceed through the accumulation of its own formal rules and devices, or is it actuated by external stimuli, by a response to the immediate environment ?

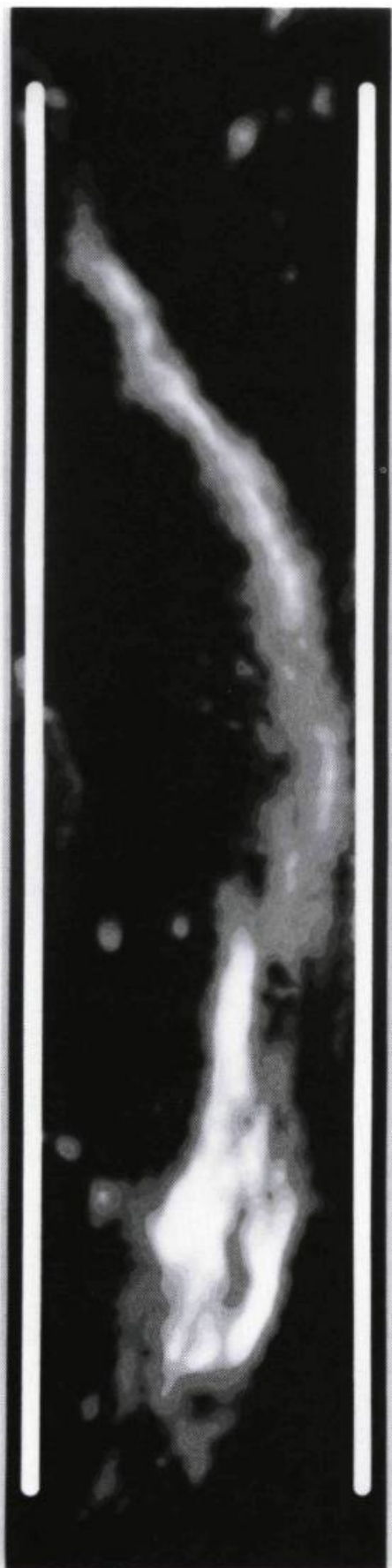
In his catalogue essay, Ostrow examines our contemporary aesthetic moment, a moment when all the mysteries of painting have already been revealed, when painting as a direct experience has been declared

dead by Minimalist and Conceptualist dogma. New strategies to revitalize the meaning and experience of abstraction were in order, and Ostrow posits that a new generation of artist, beginning in the late seventies, began to carry out such a project. "By dividing abstract painting into two texts, one concerning the means of its own making, and the other its presence as an object, elements that had previously been expressed or denied were made apparent." These elements — the polarity between diagram and surrogate, between the dictates of the formal object and its allusion to the exterior world — create an ongoing dialogue that in itself becomes the subject of the painting and of its critical discourse. "Implicit in this discourse is that object, experience and meaning are not reducible one from the others... These artists structure their works to make us acutely aware of the simultaneous and often contradictory signals that they are sending. Their paintings place the viewer in the role of an interpreter rather than a passive receiver of the truth."

This new conceptual abstraction has many practitioners, of whom Ostrow selects twelve for *Diagrams and Surrogates* : David Diao, Lydia Dona, Moira Dryer, Jack Goldstein, Mary Heilmann, Richard Kalina, Bill Komoski, Jonathan Lasker, Thomas Nozkowski, David Reed, Gary Stephan, and James Welling. These artists are well known to a New York audience. Many show regularly at other galleries in the city. What makes this exhibition particularly seductive is the implicit presentation of a new New York school of conceptual abstraction.

The twelve pieces in the show proceed from a pronounced stylistic diversity. Included are : Dryer's archly dandyish wooden construction of a signature maze; Goldstein's computerized, luridly-colored, neo-geo conflagration; Diao's post-Malevitch ideogrammatic puzzle; Nozkowski's and Lasker's figure/ground meditations; Stephan's elegant pleonasm of shape, shadow and tone; Dona's dark exploration of cybernetic grids; Komoski's cartoony eyes cavorting on a plasmic, mottled field; Welling's host of surimposed black circles; and Heilmann's neo-minimal yet expressive rectangular geometries.

All very different, yet together they share a speculative, open ended approach to sources of imagery, a willful obscurity that distrusts seamless interpretation and fixed dogma, an ability not only to embrace but to render contradiction eloquently, to juxtapose seemingly discordant elements of text and subtext. These paintings suggest a distanced, ironic counterpoint to the abstract



Jack Goldstein, *Untitled*, 1988.
Acrylic on canvas; 96 x 24 x 6 in.
Courtesy Shea & Beker Gallery, NYC

formalisms from whence they spring. They are tremendously self-knowing. They are smart art.

In articulating a dialogue between interior and exterior concerns, the work in *Diagrams and Surrogates* invites critical scrutiny not only of the objects themselves, but of the terms we use to give them meaning. "As these paintings demonstrate the impossibility of fixing meaning, they reveal that a change in context is not a change in content, but a way to retrieve certain aspects of experience from obscurity." What this exhibition rescues from obscurity is the potentiality of a New York school of abstraction for the late 1980s. In fact, several of the paintings, previously seen in one-person shows and in other contexts, acquire greater resonance and depth in their present company. What better claim can be made for a group show ?

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**Andy Warhol, Museum of Modern Art,
through May 2, 1989 —**

When Andy made his famous statement about everyone in the near future being famous for 15 minutes, he was obviously not speaking of himself. The foremost artist of his generation and one of the most prolific, Warhol remains in death, as in life, the favorite son of the New York art establishment, and by extension, the entire art world. His retrospective exhibition sprawls over two floors, the lobby and the cafeteria of the Museum of Modern Art, and gives indication that it could have easily spanned another two floors. It is everything you might want, only less.

How could we avoid writing about this show ? But how do we evaluate a career and a persona that is already so well known, so well documented ? Although there are few surprises in the exhibition, we do come upon a number of old, familiar friends under one roof. Including : the 32 original Campbell's soup cans from the Ferris Gallery show in 1962; the electric chair and disaster paintings; the Coke bottles; the dollar bills; the most wanted men series; several gilded Marilyns (including an exquisite tondo), Jackies and Elvises, and even a Natalie and a Troy; two corridors filled with cow wallpaper; the Brillo, Del Monte and Kellogg's boxes; the paint by number pieces; and an entire room devoted to the Maos, hung, as they were in Paris, over Mao wallpaper. A large nave is devoted to Andy's self portraits, spanning his career from the early 60s to the 80s, and the area usually reserved for the MOMA special projects is hung with celebrity and commission portraiture, as well as Andy's early shoe drawings, when he was a commercial illustrator. The lobby ceiling is carpeted with the Mylar pillows of the *Silver Clouds* piece, and a film program (including *Chelsea Girls*, *Empire*, *Vinyl* and *Lonesome Cowboys*) will be shown in conjunction to the exhibition.



Andy Warhol, *Black and White Retrospective*, 1979.
 Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas;
 124.5 x 155 cm. Courtesy Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich

Even had his death not occasioned a retrospective, it would have been a fine time to re-evaluate Warhol's legacy in light of contemporary developments such as commodity and media reflexive art, which pay similar obeisance to issues of commerce, consumption and economics that Warhol was introducing into the art parlance of the 60s. His embrace of banality and consumerism, of the pervasive and superficial, and of the serial, repetitive nature of the cultural icon, are now touchstones of art practice.

Warhol held up a mirror to society and reflected back who we were and what we wanted to see. Through this strategy of passive reflection, he became the first art superstar, creating a role that many would try to emulate in succeeding years. Call it Zen or call it calculated: Andy forged a unity with all aspects of our media society, and bridged the gap between the museum and the corner shop. He branched out as a magazine publisher (*Interview*), an impresario of music and performance (*Exploding Plastic Inevitable/Velvet Underground*), a filmmaker (with a readymade cast of superstars). If his serial paintings suggested the raw material of cinema (24 frames per second), so conversely his films projected a quirky static quality (48 minutes of the Empire State Building).

His use of mechanical reproduction (silkscreen) created an endless, seemingly effortless accumulation of images, an onanistic litany of Marylins and soup cans. For Andy, a Czech Catholic from Pittsburg, it was the formulation of a new pop hagiography: the icons of our age were being hammered into immortality through the sheer dint of their repetition (a single canvas with hundreds of coke bottles, a series of

canvases each with a slightly different Mao, reproduced in off register silkscreen). The facility with which his projects entered both the high art sphere and the sensationalism of the tabloid press, the alacrity of his burgeoning celebrity, and the hyperrealization of his serial commodities, which became immediately identified with the product name of "Warhol" — all offer elegant testimony to the firm finger he had placed on the heartbeat of American life. It was no accident that he named his studio *The Factory*, a locus for the mass production of objects, dreams and desires. For Andy, more was, in fact, more.

This said, it is paradoxically his earliest, hand painted work (before he learned silkscreening technique from Robert Rauschenberg) that carries the greatest resonance — perhaps because it is less familiar (not as widely exhibited and photographed) or because it indicates an incipient aesthetic in formation. The commercial drawings of shoes for I. Miller (some in gold leaf), the early paintings of comic book heroes (Superman, Dick Tracy), of dance step diagrams, nose jobs, newspaper headlines and advertisements, strike us as most remarkable, revelatory and affecting. They offer a glimpse of Warhol before he was WARHOL, and allows us to be present at the inception of the most remarkable career in contemporary art.

Steven Kaplan

NOTE

1. All quotes from Saul Ostrow's catalogue essay, © 1989 Shea & Beker