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*Entering the Eighties*



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Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County  
February 11–April 13, 1983



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# *Entering the Eighties*

Selections from the Permanent Collection of  
the Whitney Museum of American Art

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The art scene is heating up. A new body of work has made a spectacular debut, riveting the public's attention and eliciting an enthusiasm from the media unparalleled since Pop Art. It is no coincidence that a sixties revival is well under way and that Pop Art and culture are subjects of particular fascination. Much of the work being produced today is both a part of this larger revival and responsible for fueling interest in it.

The highly diverse, pluralist art of the 1970s was antithetical to the notion of a unified style. It resisted the comfort of categorization, of naming, and has therefore been accused of indecisiveness, of a lack of ambition and conviction. But over the past few years, there has been a feverish attempt to revive the idea of a mainstream, and to rescue painting from the perilous zone of situational art experiences—installations, theatrical performances, and earthworks—where the integrity of the individual art object seemed threatened. By marketplace standards at least, the campaign has achieved success. What we now see in galleries, museums, and in print suggests that the “fragmented” art of the seventies has coalesced into something with palpable, identifiable features. This new mainstream is not in want of names; it has been announced

with a surfeit of labels: “Neo-Expressionism,” “New Image,” “Naive Nouveau,” “New Wave,” and “New Spirit.”

“Spectacle” is the key word for much of the emerging art. In direct contrast to Minimalist principles, it rejects cool, controlled, elegant structures in favor of explosive energy, chaotic untidiness, deliberate crudeness, and agitated surfaces. Here is an art about sensation—mammoth in scale, loaded with paint, dazzling, vibrating, electric. It overpowers the viewer and successfully competes for attention in a world of sensory hyperstimulation. Painting is the dominant mode of this new art—the surface texture and “aura” of paint are essential to a work's attraction and power. The thick impastos and the evidence of the artist's hand make the surface highly sensual, almost seductive in its physical presence.

Along with their renewed engagement in painting, many artists recapitulate expressionist styles and traditional subjects. Images from popular culture have become available for appropriation. Allegorical, religious, and mythological themes, the figure, landscape, and still life are once again respectable. This connection to the masters and monuments of the past has been

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crucial in establishing the validity of a new aesthetic orthodoxy. But while many artists seem to seek comfort in tradition, there is at the same time an obsessive concern with "newness."

One suspects that something is being concealed under the guise of the "new," that the wild gesture is, to some extent, a pose. Otherwise, how could all the violence and brutality of recent art be so attractive? And the self-proclaimed "personal and emotional force" is not altogether convincing when these feelings are delivered to us with such irony—in a theatrical guise, almost approaching kitsch. To one observer, the work seems exhibitionistic and "straining after effect."<sup>1</sup> To another, "the repetition of the painterly gesture 'so full of spontaneity,' becomes an empty mechanics."<sup>2</sup> There is the distinct sense that these works function as an elaborate screen, perhaps unconsciously erected to mask resignation and submission to existing social conditions.

In a recent issue of an art magazine devoted to "The Expressionism Question," one artist gives a clue to the ambivalence of the new aesthetic. He claims that Neo-Expressionism is all around us, that the *New York Post*, for instance, is a Neo-Expressionist paper, while the *New York*

*Times* definitely is not.<sup>3</sup> The *Post*, like "scary movies," exploits brutality and violence in its headlines—a very lucrative tactic. The horror mixed with fascination that we experience—the immediate visceral impact—diverts our attention from the more disturbing underlying causes of the actual events. The front-page collage of sex, death, war, and the urban nightmare removes us from real social and political relations to a soap-operatic world of private fantasies and terrors. Like the *Post*, much new painting attracts us with its boldness, audacity, and graphic authority—its ability to provoke a tingling sensation, a charge, even as it subtly anaesthetizes.

Lisa Phillips  
Associate Curator, Branch Museums

#### Notes

1. Calvin Tomkins, "Looking for the Zeitgeist," *The New Yorker*, December 6, 1982, p. 150.
  2. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," *October*, 16 (Spring 1981), p. 56.
  3. Richard Bosman, quoted in "Expressionism Today: An Artists' Symposium," *Art in America*, 70 (December 1982), p. 60.
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# Works in the Exhibition

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Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width, precedes depth.

**Jonathan Borofsky** (b. 1942)

*Self-Portrait at 2668379 and 2670098*, 1979–80

Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 84¾ x 48

Purchase, with funds from Joel and Anne Ehrenkranz 82.3

**Louisa Chase** (b. 1951)

*Rose Bush/Waterfall*, 1980

Ink and watercolor on handmade paper, 22 x 30¾ (irregular)

Promised gift of Norman Dubrow P.1.82

**Robert Graham** (b. 1938)

*Stephanie and Spy*, 1981

Cast bronze, 61½ x 11½ x 7½; base, 71 x 56 x 14

Promised gift of Roy and Carol Doumani

**Bryan Hunt** (b. 1947)

*Double Cantata*, 1982

Lacquer on silk paper over wood, 7 x 62 x 7

Promised gift of M. Anthony Fisher

**Bill Jensen** (b. 1945)

*The Meadow*, 1980–81

Oil on linen, 22 x 22

Purchase, with funds from the Wilfred P. and Rose Cohen Purchase Fund 81.36

**Steve Keister** (b. 1949)

*U.S.O. #68*, 1981

Zebra skin and acrylic on wood, 24 x 22 x 33

Purchase, with funds from the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc., Seymour M. Klein, President 81.14

**Robert Kushner** (b. 1949)

*Viva Flamenco*, 1979

India ink, gouache, and metallic paint on paper, 19 x 18¾

Promised gift of Norman Dubrow P.2.82

**Kim MacConnel** (b. 1946)

*Formidable*, 1981

Acrylic on cotton, 97¼ x 129¼

Purchase, with funds from the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc., Seymour M. Klein, President 82.8

**Nam June Paik** (b. 1932)

*V-gramid*, 1982

32 color televisions, 8 black-and-white televisions, and 2 stereo speakers, 186¾ x 85 x 74 overall; videotape by Paik produced with the assistance of Shridar Bapat, Jud Yalkut, Pamela Sousa, and David Atwood, 8½-minute sequence repeated on 60-minute cassette.

Purchase, with funds from the Lemberg Foundation in honor of Samuel Lemberg 82.11a–xx

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**Ed Paschke** (b. 1939)

*Violencia*, 1980

Oil on canvas, 74 x 96

Gift of Sherry and Alan Koppel in memory of Miriam and Herbert Koppel 82.46

**James Rosenquist** (b. 1933)

*Fahrenheit, 1982 Degrees*, 1982

Colored ink on frosted mylar, 27 x 64½

Purchase, with funds from the John I.H. Baur Purchase Fund, the Mr. and Mrs. M. Anthony Fisher Purchase Fund, and the Lauder Foundation-Drawing Fund 82.35

**Susan Rothenberg** (b. 1945)

*For the Light*, 1978-79

Acrylic and plastic on canvas, 105 x 87

Purchase, with funds from Peggy and Richard Danziger 79.23

**David Salle** (b. 1952)

*Splinter Man*, 1982

Oil and acrylic on canvas; diptych, 98 x 196 overall

Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Charles M. Diker 82.12a-b

**Julian Schnabel** (b. 1951)

*Hope*, 1982

Oil on velvet, 108 x 156

Purchase, with funds from an anonymous donor 82.13

**Joel Shapiro** (b. 1941)

*Untitled*, 1980-81

Bronze, 52⅞ x 64 x 45½

Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee

**Richard Shaw** (b. 1941)

*Mike Goes Back to T.*, 1980

Glazed porcelain with overglaze transfers, 41¾ x 13½ x 17½

Purchase, with funds from the Burroughs Wellcome Purchase Fund 81.4

**Frank Stella** (b. 1936)

*Silverstone*, 1981

Mixed media on aluminum and fiberglass, 105½ x 122 x 22

Purchase, with funds from the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc., Seymour M. Klein, President, the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation, Inc., Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Meltzer, and the Painting and Sculpture Committee 81.26

**James Surls** (b. 1943)

*Me and the Butcher Knives*, 1982

Oak and mahogany, 101 x 37 x 39

Purchase, with funds from an anonymous donor 82.14

**Robert Zakanitch** (b. 1935)

*Baskets*, 1979

Graphite on paper, 39¾ x 39¾

Promised gift of Norman Dubrow P.4.82

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"Entering the Eighties" was organized by Lisa Phillips, Associate Curator, Branch Museums, with Pamela Gruninger, Manager, Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County. Tom O'Connor, Manager, Headquarters Services, and John Ruser, Building Manager, Champion International Corporation, provided invaluable advice and assistance during a most challenging installation.

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Cover:

Frank Stella, *Silverstone*, 1981  
Mixed media on aluminum and fiberglass, 105½ x 122 x 22 inches  
Purchase, with funds from the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc., Seymour M. Klein, President; the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation, Inc.; Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Meltzer; and the Painting and Sculpture Committee 81.26  
Photograph by Geoffrey Clements

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Tuesday–Saturday 11:00–5:00  
Free Admission

Gallery Talks  
Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday 12:30

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