

André Emmerich, New York

The New Generation: A Curator's Choice

by Karen Wilkin

Anyone interested in the history of art knows about national and period styles. Paintings of the 1930s look like paintings of the 1930s, not of the '20s or '40s, but French paintings of the 1930s look different from, say, American paintings of the same period. This has nothing to do with the artist's intentions. The marks of time and place are inescapable. But lately, there's evidence of a new kind of internationalism. It's easy enough to say it is due to the speed with which visual information is transmitted nowadays, or the ease with which people, even artists, travel. Whatever the explanation, though, there are noticeable similarities of concern among artists of the same generation (whether we define generation in terms of strict chronology or in terms of professional life) which go beyond the unavoidable likeness which comes from making art at more or less the same time.

It's perhaps especially true of performance and video artists who have strong international ties and frequent exchanges of information, and as a result, seem particularly well informed about what their colleagues are doing in other parts of the world. But it is also true of an international group of "traditional" painters who make objects out of paint on a surface and frankly adhere to the tradition of modernist abstract art. They share assumptions about what paintings can be, about working methods, about imagery itself.

It's fashionable to disparage the likeness between these abstract artists as evidence of a new academicism and to dismiss the community of their concerns as slavish allegiance to powerful but exhausted archetypes. It's even more fashionable to point out that abstraction is dead. Despite this, large numbers of thoughtful, serious, energetic painters in Canada, the U.S., Great Britain and elsewhere continue to find abstraction challenging and to produce works whose accomplishment is undisputed, even by those who maintain that the basic impulse is misguided. There are enough of them, and enough of them of high enough quality, that Kenworth Moffett, the Curator of Contemporary Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, decided to look more closely at the phenomenon in an exhibition called "The New Generation: A Curator's Choice" at André Emmerich Gallery, New York, this past fall.



1 Darryl Hughto / *Forever Amber*, 1976-79, acrylic on canvas, 95 x 59 in., photo: Grant Barker / courtesy: André Emmerich Gallery, New York.

The New Generation / continued

The show had self-imposed limitations. Because it was to be seen first in New York and then to travel in Europe, the number of artists and the number and size of works were restricted. All works had to be available for purchase, so nothing could be borrowed from existing collections. Moffett eventually arrived at a list of twelve painters from four countries: John Griefen, Darryl Hughto, Kikuo Saito and Sandi Slone from the U.S., Joseph Drapell, Harold Feist, Paul Fournier and Carol Sutton from Canada, Douglas Abercrombie, Jennifer Durrant and John McLean from Great Britain, and Gottfried Mairwöger from Austria. There were two works by each.

The idea of the show was admirable and it promises to be an annual event, with a different curator each year. It's unlikely that Emmerich, a prestigious, long established institution, would show works by any of these younger artists, in the course of their normal program, so an "emerging talent" exhibition is especially appealing. (No one imagined that simply having works hung at Emmerich was going to transform anyone's life, but the seriousness of the place and the sheer glamor of it certainly delighted the participants.)

Most importantly, "The New Generation: A Curator's Choice" was exactly what it claimed to be — one informed individual's declaration of his taste. Whether one agreed with Moffett or not, there was no doubt that his choices were dictated by his own convictions, not by considerations of balanced representation or equality. But Moffett's selection made it clear that he was determined to emphasize the connections between the new generation and the older artists they professed to admire. This attitude appeared to have influenced not only his choice of artists, but his choice of works, and this, to some extent, led to difficulties.

Paul Fournier, for example, was represented by two of his atmospheric "cloud" pictures. Good as they were, they seemed to have been included as much because they illustrated the currency of the all-over picture, as because they stood for Fournier's latest concerns. His newer works, in fact, are more personal, less clearly allied with the provocative ideas of Olitski or even Monet. If Moffett's intention was to demonstrate Fournier's awareness

of Olitski as a precedent for a kind of chiaroscuro abstraction, he made his point well. Fournier's paintings were fine works, but they were perhaps less indicative of his present obsessions than of his earlier indebtedness. John Griefen, too, suffered from this sort of editorializing. He seemed to have been included because of his obvious descent from the Olitski lineage, and the individual works which represented him declare this unequivocally. (It's possible, though, that his newer, less derivative explorations of color may not have been available at the time the show was selected.)

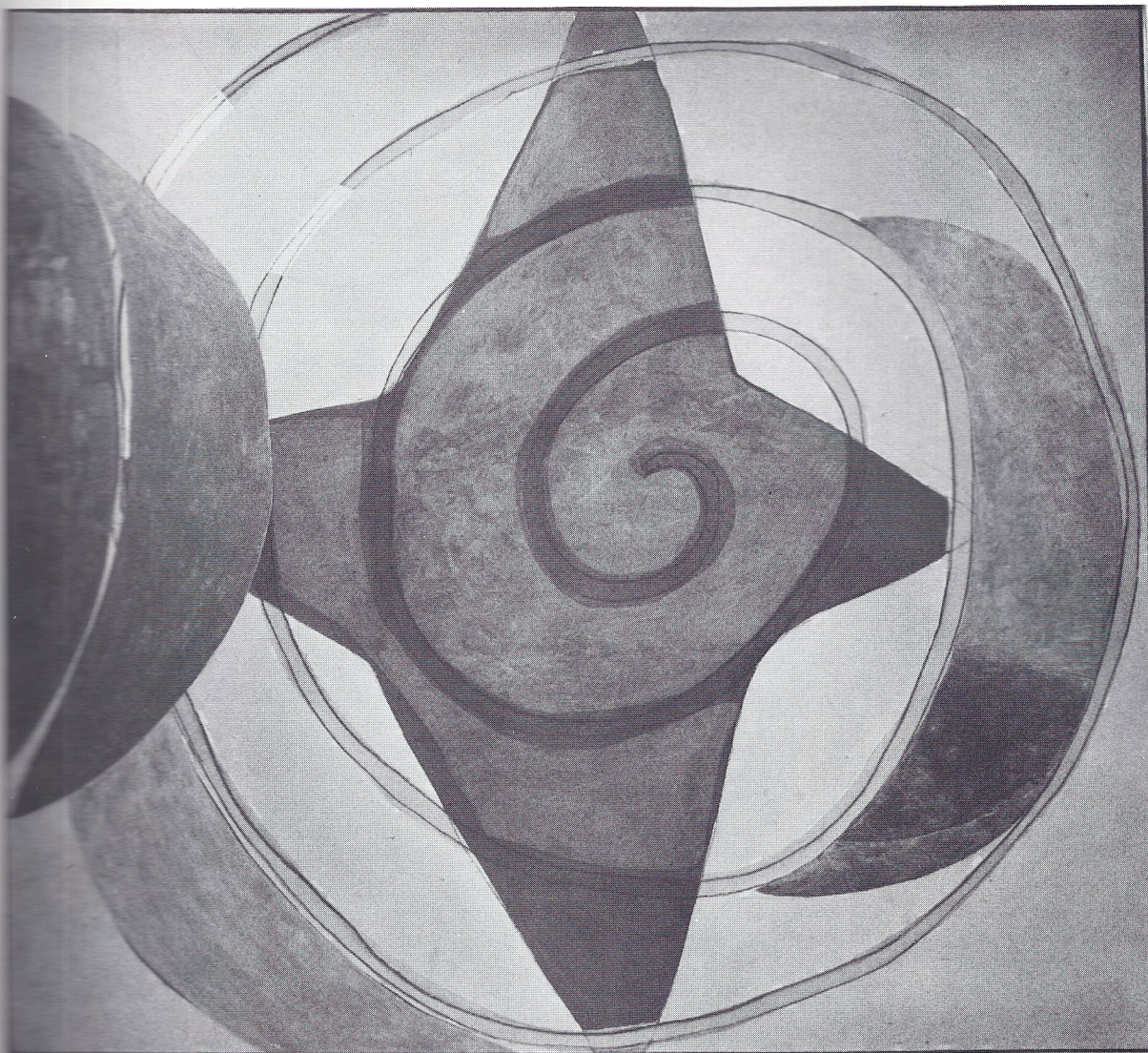
This is not to say that none of the twelve emerged as individuals. On the contrary, Harold Feist's roughly scraped "spoke" pictures looked powerful and original. Like many of his colleagues in the show, Feist has arrived at a simplified centralized format which allows him to concentrate on nuances of color, surface, gesture and proportion. What's impressive is the amount of variation he is able to elicit from deliberately limited means. Each of his two canvases seemed like a complete reinvention of the idea of radiating strokes of color; each spoke established apparently new ways of marrying color, width, density and gesture, to make an arresting whole. Carol Sutton's larger painting, *Serene Room*, looked especially strong, in context, because of its idiosyncratic alterations of her characteristic "fan" layout. She uses an unprecedented curly drawing in this work, along with uninhibited spots and streaks of color, which provide welcome counterpoint to the dominant fan.

Darryl Hughto's diamonds and Joseph Drapell's circular "spins" were notable, too, for their avoidance of a formula, in spite of fidelity to a readily identifiable structure. Hughto's angular, not quite centered, configurations succeed best when the enclosed diamond (or diamonds) sets up an uncomfortable pressure on the edges and corners of the canvas. When he doesn't manage this by means of drawing or placement, he must do so with color; ideally, he does both at once. The Hughtos were outstanding, and one Drapell, *Coronation*, was equally impressive. (The exhibition was divided between the two floors of the Emmerich Gallery, so works by the same artist were often widely sepa-

rated.) Perhaps the Drapells should have been seen together. Nevertheless, *Coronation's* deadpan, frontal spin, dense paint against thinner, expanding layers, was Drapell at his best: a centralized, almost mechanical gesture barely contained by the surface to which it was applied.

Despite the obvious similarities, Moffett's juxtaposition of British, American and Canadian painters forced us to look for differences as well as connections. It's easy to understand why the North Americans should form a cohesive group. Three of the four Canadians studied in the U.S. and two were born there. Interestingly, though, the eight North Americans come originally from such diverse places as Tokyo, Boston, Virginia, Texas and Czechoslovakia. The three British painters have less varied histories. In any event, there were odd cross-references which united the group as a whole and blurred distinctions between North Americans and Europeans. Both Kikuo Saito and John McLean seem to have taken a hard look at Jack Bush's work; Douglas Abercrombie and Paul Fournier share convictions about all overness and density of surface; John Griefen and Gottfried Mairwöger both depend upon almost imperceptible nuances of surface and tonality; Abercrombie, McLean and Sandi Slone all explore delicately adjusted transparent colors. Yet as a whole, the Europeans seemed more reticent, more concerned with subtleties than their North American colleagues, even Jennifer Durrant, whose enormous canvases have a generosity of scale which seem peculiar to the New World. Her odd spiral images and soaked-in surfaces were uncompromisingly British, however, echoing the elegance of Ben Nicholson or the delicate drawing of William Scott, without looking in the least like either of them. Durrant looked particularly independent, in the context of the show, since she was almost the only painter concerned with what could be described in hackneyed terms as figure-ground relationships. Saito could be described in this way, too, but unlike Saito's color patches, Durrant's "figures" seem not to have arisen from the manipulation of paint, but instead, from preconceived, allusive shapes.

Douglas Abercrombie's pictures were



6 Jennifer Durrant/
Ghost Painting 1978/
acrylic on canvas / 102
× 113 in. / photo: Grant
Barker / courtesy: Andre
Emmerich Gallery, New
York.

among the most enigmatic of the group. At first, they seemed like painstaking attempts to approximate the complexity and density of a Pollock or an Olitski without first-hand experience of what the surfaces of these works are really like. But with time, they declared themselves as self-sufficient and absorbing. The greyed-down color remained problematic, but the worked, articulated surface, the sense of accumulation and of pre-existing states rewarded attention.

The catalogue which accompanied the show posed the same problems as Moffett's conception itself. His introductory essay is a paradigmatic discussion of recent modernist painting, a perceptive and lucid discussion of the development of

radical notions of what painting could be in the 50s and 60s. It provides a useful context for the painters in the show, but it never comes to terms with their individual qualities. It is true that the twelve are young artists, all in their late thirties or early forties, at the beginning of their mature careers. Nevertheless, as Moffett himself points out, they have begun to establish their individuality, and it seems unnecessary to dwell on their legitimacy within the tradition of modernist abstraction.

It goes without saying that all of the painters in the exhibition have ancestors. Recent art tends to be about other art as much as about anything else. Part of the strength of the work in the show derives from its connection with some of the best

and most inventive painting of recent times, but this shouldn't be the only reason we pay attention to it. The best painters in the "New Generation" will claim our attention because of their own inventiveness, not merely because of their ability to absorb that of their mentors.

As I said, no one expected the exhibition to change anyone's life. It's notable, of course, that the Canadian contingent looked so strong in relation to their colleagues. It's gratifying that the curator of a major museum has taken the trouble to look attentively at the work of newer artists. (The Boston Museum has acquired works by many of the artists in the show for their permanent collection — a nice declaration of serious interest.) In a sense, the exhibi-



7 Jennifer Durrant / *Other Cloud Painting* / 1978 / acrylic on canvas / 103 × 123½ in. / colour: courtesy Rhineburgh Press, New York.



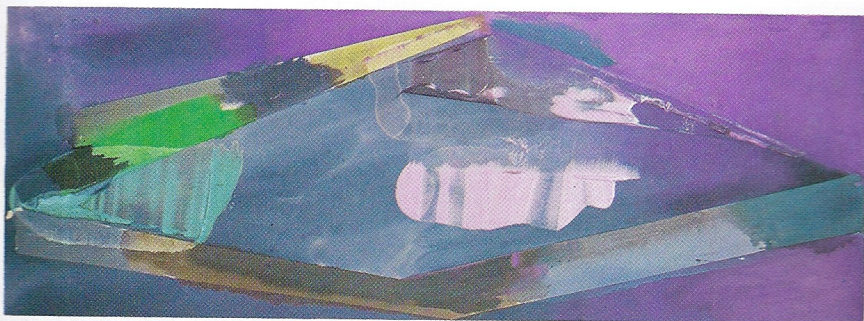
8 Sandi Sloane / *First Intent* / 1980 / acrylic on canvas / 70 × 72 in. / colour: courtesy Rhineburgh Press, New York.



9 Gottfried Mairwöger / *Eastbound Again* / 1979 / oil on canvas / 55¼ × 60¼ in. / colour: courtesy Rhineburgh Press, New York.



10 Joseph Drapell / *Coronation* / 1978 / acrylic on canvas / 77 × 90 in. / colour: courtesy Rhineburgh Press, New York.



11 Darryl Hughto/*Black Bass*/1979/acrylic on canvas/31 × 86 in./colour: courtesy Rhineburgh Press, New York.



12 Kikuo Saito/*Gravelly Run* 1978-79/acrylic on canvas/66 × 77 in./colour: courtesy Rhineburgh Press, New York.



13 Paul Fournier/*Ophir*/1979-80/acrylic and metallic powder on canvas/48 × 96 in./colour: courtesy Rhineburgh Press, New York.



14 John Griefen/*Exile -2*/1980/acrylic on canvas/91½ × 44¾ in./colour: courtesy Rhineburgh Press, New York.

tion is ultimately more important for the European painters than the Americans or Canadians, since there is infinitely more opportunity for artists of their generation to show in New York or Boston or Toronto or Montreal than in London, but the European tour offers good exposure for everyone. It's certainly not the first time that many of these painters have been seen together, nor, I suspect, is it the last. It will be interesting to see what becomes of this "New Generation". □

Itinerary

The New Generation: A Curator's Choice opened at the André Emmerich Gallery, N.Y. Sept. 4-27, 1980. It was shown at the American Centre, Paris, Dec. 10, 1980 - Jan. 17, 1981. Amerika Haus, Berlin, Mar. 19 - Apr. 25, 1981. It will be at the Sociedade Nacional de las Artes, Lisbon, through May and will then continue on to Great Britain.

Author

Karen Wilkin is an independent curator and critic living in Toronto and former Chief Curator of the Edmonton Art Gallery.