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an eruption of EROTICA

by Gregory Battcock
Editor- "Arts Magazine"

In only a half dozen years the whole direction of contemporary art has changed more radically than during any comparable period in the entire history of art. The typical painting and sculpture of 1974 would have been inconceivable to even the most sophisticated connoisseur of one decade ago. And because of the sudden change in the way art is made and appreciated today, we find an entire new range of erotic art that has suddenly become not only possible, but acceptable.

A decade or so ago most serious painting had to be "abstract" or "non-objective" if it was any good. Important developments in the fine arts depend heavily on contemporary developments in philosophy and aesthetics and, during the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties, that meant a style of art consisting of blobs, smears, drips, splashes, fuzzyness and just about anything else. As long as the end result didn't resemble anything other than the materials the work was made of, it didn't matter what the picture looked like. A sculpture that consisted of a few pieces of junk iron aimed a life of its own, and that was that. It made sense, but it didn't refer to anything that most people could recognize. The painter, or sculptor, did what he had to do and that was to show respect for the materials of his craft.

NEW REALISM

Today we find that artists and philosophers are eager to investigate a new idea. It is an idea that insists that the materials of the art work can be most effective when they are employed to disguise themselves and appear to be what they are not.

So, instead of looking like ordinary, runny, drippy paint, the artist tries to make the paint look like something else, some other kind of surface, such as soft flesh, or metallic hardness, or something wet and slippery -- anything as long as it is something we can immediately identify. The artist, then, offers an image that causes us to immediately refer to a corresponding image from our immediate experience.

A sculpture, for example, will refer to cloth fabric, and a work made of clay will look just like skin, or rubber.

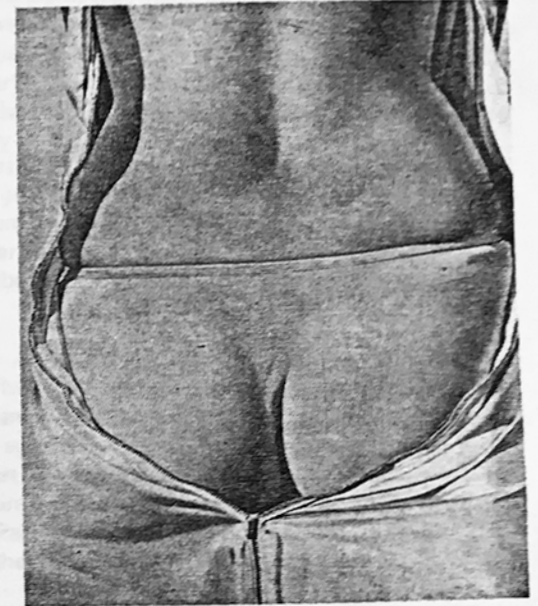
Thus the new artist, the new Realist artist, believes his painting should contain an image that is recognizable. In fact what happens is that the painting then REFERS to something that it isn't; it refers to something the viewer is already familiar with. Therefore we call the new type of art a "referential" art.

TOWARD THE SENSUAL & EROTIC

Obviously the new kind of very realistic art can be more specific than an abstract type art based mainly on intellectual ideas. It is reasonable to expect that the new Realist art will focus upon subjects of everyday interest. Such works by the new Realist artists will refer to situations, places, ideas and conditions that one can quickly and easily associate with, or IDENTIFY without any struggle and, in fact, without even thinking about it very much.

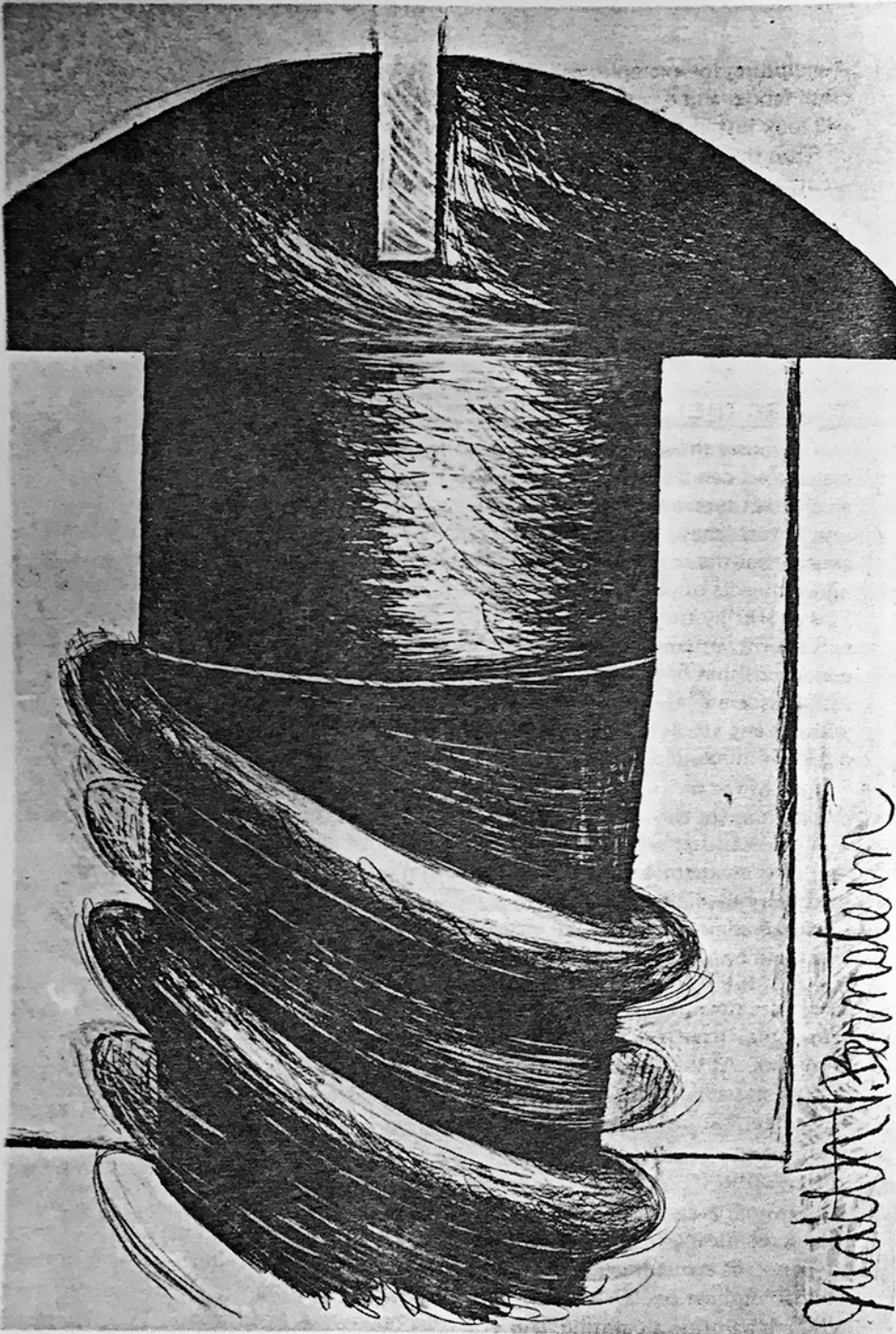
One of the most interesting possibilities for the new Realist art is that subjects that couldn't come across very well in abstract works, can now be made very explicit and immediate. Paintings about the everyday environment and everyday things like gasoline stations, fried chicken places and street scenes are now possible and, as we know, they have suddenly become very common. At the same time we find them quite amazing, as we had almost forgotten that ordinary, simple places and experiences could be the subject for serious art.

Another area that was almost totally neglected during the last fifty years or so concerns erotic images and images of sexual implication. Of course, let's say you are painting a painting, and you deliberately try to make sure that it



John Kacere "Light Purple
Panties" (1971)

Picture by E. Pollitzer



Charcoal on paper - Judith Bernstein

EROTICA continued

does NOT look like anything familiar, because you want to make sure the viewer will not think it refers to anything at all except what it actually is. Well then, would be rather foolish to try to make it look very sensual or erotic. That would defeat the purpose.

But the new, Realist type of art is just right for creating works of sensual, erotic or sexual implication. In fact the new style seems just made for such subject matter, and a good many new artists are working very seriously with art that is deliberately sensual and that refers specifically to sexual situations.

It's all part of the democratization of art and is a good thing for art and for the people and for the artist. It allows the artist to enlarge his audience and, at the same time, permits the audience the opportunity of studying pictures of sophisticated design and high quality workmanship. Fortunately, in the art galleries and museums and universities most people are too intelligent to fuss about the subject matter of a work of art. Such people realize that the entire history of art is crammed full with paintings, sculptures and drawings that refer to explicit sexual and erotic situations and such works represent important contributions to human culture and art history.

CENSORING EROTICISM

The usual objections to erotic art come from people who, in general, feel left out or alienated from the cultural mainstream. They generally experience a sort of resentment which they conveniently direct against the art works. Such erotic works are, for these people, handy scapegoats upon which they direct their inability to identify positively with the culture and, more important with reality itself. The censors and the bookburners usually don't care about the artworks themselves or the rewards they offer; rather they object to others enjoying and appreciating works they themselves don't understand.

A major subject in art criticism today is the answer to this question: "When is erotic art REALLY erotic art?" Another question frequently asked is "When does erotic art become pornographic art?"

Neither of these questions can be answered completely. It is useless to try. The first question cannot be answered because we now realize that what is erotic for one person need not be erotic in the slightest for another. In other words not everybody is turned on by the same thing. Thus a work of art that depicts boots and leather objects, say, may interest one person and leave another completely cold. What is important, however, is whether or not it is a GOOD work of art. If it is, nobody will be left entirely cold because all art works can be approached on many different levels.

Whereas one person will concentrate his attention upon the REFERENTIAL content of the work -- the leather objects and the sado-masochistic aspects of the painting, for example -- another will concentrate upon the composition, the quality of the rendering and the overall aesthetic factors contained within the work. It is important to realize that any serious art work need not be dismissed because it fails to please on one level: there are always other levels to be considered.

Any discussion of new erotic art would ultimately focus on the origins of eroticism in modern art, and certainly the paintings from the 1930's and 1940's of Paul Cadmus would have to be considered. Cadmus painted realistic street views of

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ghetto and slum youths that contained heavy undertones of eroticism. As all erotic art depends upon a certain amount of fantasy and fantasizing, Camdus introduces a good deal of suggestion to his paintings, and it is the extraordinary viewpoint of Cadmus, coupled with the highly suggestive posturing and gesticulation of his figures, that make the paintings so compelling.

YESTERDAY'S PORNOGRAPHY, TODAY'S ART

A new artist of the 1970's who introduces lots of suggestive poses to his slick, mass-media nudes is Mel Ramos. While his paintings are certainly very photographic, they are much more erotic than ordinary photographs. The reason for the superior erotic content of Ramos' nudes is, simply, that the artist can make subtle changes in his subjects that increase the potency of the viewpoints they choose to emphasize.

The distinction between authentically erotic art and pornography is impossible to determine. What appears completely pornographic at one time can, a few years later, appear to be a sensual and serious art work of the highest standards. Today we look at the drawings of Quaintance and Colt with a degree of serious appreciation that would have been almost completely impossible ten years ago. At that time such works were definitely regarded as obscene. Today we think them sensitive drawings of great skill and imagination.

And now let us admire the works of John Kacere. There is no mystery concerning the subjects of Kacere's fine paintings. However they refer to more than what you see, which is right there in front of you and either you like it or you don't. Or, I suppose, you can do both, i.e. like the paintings but NOT the subject and its implications. Or you can like the subjects and implications and NOT like the paintings, though that would be a little silly.

I have spoken to a lot of people who are not deeply into feminine buns but, to a man, they have expressed admiration for the pictures themselves. One thing Kacere has accomplished is that he has created an art that the people can like.

Joan Semmel's paintings also leave out a good deal of the picture. They too focus on details and therefore the artist emphasizes the frame, or edge of the surface. The edges have the authority to "cut off" a picture at a certain point, and that is exactly what it does.

Harold Stevenson is yet another artist to "cut off" a good part of the pictorial subject. At the same time he emphasizes a textural sensuality that itself seems to dominate the picture.

It would appear that there are about as many directions open to artists of sensual or erotic orientation, as there are lights on Broadway. The only limitation to the field of erotic art is the imaginations of the artists. And erotic remains as it has always been -- an area of artistic exploration that reaches into all areas of human thought and philosophical speculation. Attempts to suppress the erotic artist will always end in failure because the human sensibility itself depends upon the stimulation of art. The most human of all art forms is that which appeals to the imagination. The most imaginative of all art forms is erotic art.

opposite page, singer performer
LINDA GERARD, photo by
Ken Duncan





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FINANCE EDITOR - Rick Emory
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR - Ron Lass
CONTRIBUTING ARTIST -

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STAFF -----

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PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

Designed for HOLD HANDS by
Photographer

ALTON LANDIS

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