

ART: 2 LOOKS AT CLEVE GRAY'S WORKS

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CLEVE GRAY has had anything but a black and white career. As a student at Princeton, he studied Chinese art with the noted scholar George Rowley. In Paris after World War II, he studied painting with Andre Lhote and Jacques Villon, two painters passionate about structure whose work reflects the glory and decline of the School of Paris. In the United States in the 50's, when Abstract Expressionism seemed to have stolen the creative fire from Europe, Gray shifted from composition to gesture, and from figuration to abstraction. In the 1960's he was a contributing editor of *Art in America*. Between 1968 and 1971 he edited books on David Smith, Hans Richter and John Marin. He has traveled extensively in Asia, North Africa and Europe.

The small retrospective of paintings at the Armstrong Gallery, 50 West 57th Street, through Feb. 3, and "Cleve Gray: Works on Paper 1940-1986," at the Brooklyn Museum through Feb. 23, reveal a passionate, uneven artist whose still evolving work is defined in part by homelessness and movement. Gray has always worked in series. Like other artists of his generation, the 68-year-old painter would rather allow an idea to develop in independent stages than build a concentrated statement in which the shapes and stages of an idea can come together and create a sense of place. His shapes and figures tend to float alone. In his constant exploration of figure and ground, he has shifted back and forth, emphasizing first one, then the other.

One of the problems of the work is that Gray has the Chinese feeling for opposites, and swings from one extreme to the other, but he does not allow the dynamic or explosive interaction between them that helped Abstract Expressionism take off. Figure and ground, clashing colors, do not fight; the discretion of Chinese art and the impulsiveness of Abstract Expressionism exist in an uneasy truce. Gray's gestural work may be in some way about touch, but there is in fact little touching within it. Because of this, there are important issues in the work but rarely a sense of something important at stake.

The Armstrong show is a bit of a mess. It contains 45 works from 1934 to the present. The show is too crowded, too ambitious for the space, and not sequential enough. But a sense of the artist does emerge. There are realistic self-portraits from the 30's and 40's; in a self-portrait from 1980, the head looks like a skull and for the first time Gray moves toward Edvard Munch. One of the surprises of the show is "Refuse," a 1947 painting of a naked, featureless, sexless heap of bodies inspired by the artist's tour of duty in World War II.

There are studies for "Threnody," Gray's grand statement about mourning and rebirth commissioned in 1972 by the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, N.Y. This series, with its S-shaped forms, sometimes still, sometimes wriggling like a

beached fish trying to shake free of death, seems to have liberated something: afterward, Gray's work is less resistant to composition, and it increases in confidence and depth. The show also includes small paintings from the "Conjugation" series, in which lines dance and play. And it includes the large 1980 "Underwood," where gestures forming the outline of a hat are pinned to a red ground.

Gray is an abstract artist who has insisted on the importance of redemptive content. Few painters would have even considered searching for an equivalent in abstract painting for the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk Quan Duc. In Gray's 1963 painting called "Reverend Quan Duc," a cross rises out of the ashen knot or ball of black and red fire. Gray's visit to the Jewish cemetery in Prague in the early 80's inspired a series of paintings in which tombstones become steles of light. In the "Holocaust" series of 1985, piles of disembodied figures are transformed into communities of lost souls.

The exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum was carefully chosen and installed by Linda Konheim Kramer, the museum's curator of prints and drawings. Here the artistic development is clear, from the representational works of the 40's, to the experimentation with different media in the 50's and 60's, to the crucial shift from oil to acrylic in the 60's, to the increasing freedom of the 70's and 80's. The 1980 "Roman Walls" drawings are among the best works Gray has done. His diagonal lines can seem to cut the dense ground like Lucio Fontana's knife cut canvas; they can also make us feel as if we are looking inside time.

It is a shame the two exhibitions are in different boroughs. There are 1944 drawings of "London Ruins" at the museum, and a painting based on a drawing of London ruins at the gallery. The Jacques Villon-like planes in the drawing of Mont St. Michel at the museum show up in a painting of the Palazzo Vecchio at the gallery. After Gray's work became abstract, the drawings still look like the paintings, but they feel very different. Given the restlessness and rootlessness that are almost endemic to this work, it would be helpful if the differences between the two media were clearly defined. Also of interest this week: Kris Ruhs - Untitled Theater (Richard Green Gallery, 152 Wooster Street): This installation brings together work very different from the abstract paintings and sculptures for which Kris Ruhs is known. His "Untitled Theater" includes drawings, puppets and paintings featuring an everyman, with a jerky body and one eye, who can do anything. The show is too crowded, but it has inspired moments, particularly in the work on paper.

For the largest series in the show, called "Dancing Men," Ruhs took 49 magazine pages, mostly from fashion publications, rubbed out the images and applied a layer of paint. Then in each rectangle he painted a figure in black outline in a vague, mosaic-dotted space.

The procession of figures, like a pedimental frieze or like the rapid succession of images forming a cartoon, bridges fashion with high art. The figures show off, wave, yell and bow. Everything they do suggests a fashion pose. Every now and then, however, a figure takes on a pose that is reminiscent of an image by Picasso, or Degas or Michelangelo. The link between fashion and high art is theatricality and performance.

"Untitled Theater" gives an even clearer picture of Ruhs's feeling for the relation of figure to frame. In these nine works, organized in three rows of three, like tiles, figures are rightside up and upside down, flying through space or trapped like bugs in a web. Because of his feeling for architecture and design, even simple drawings like these can seem as hypnotic as the movements of a clock. (Through Jan. 31.) Susan Shatter (Fischbach Gallery, 24 West 57th Street): Susan Shatter's work continues to grow deeper and more intense. Her current exhibition includes panoramic paintings of Hawaii and the Grand Canyon and watercolors of Hawaii, the Grand Canyon and Greece. In all the paintings, nature is wild. There are no traces of human life. In each one, there is evidence of Shatter's increasing ability to put brush to canvas and feel earth and water swell.

In the warmly lighted, soothingly painted landscapes, there is no solid ground anywhere. The longer we look at "Canyon Rose," the more the canyon seems to be splitting and cracking before our eyes. In "Haleakala (House of the Sun)," the earth seem to be sliding. In "Above the Clouds," there is a sense of being at the edge of the earth. In "Winged Shadow, Waimea Canyon, Kauai," clouds roll in, shadows deepen and the earth turns cold.

In this existential vision the experience of the landscape and the experience of painting - and perhaps even the experience of living - seem very much the same. The artist has painted a seductive, untamed world that is raw, expansive and luminous, but in which there is no foothold and no refuge, and ultimately no help. In the nature Shatter paints, and in the way she paints it, beauty and risk go together. (Through Jan. 28.) New Visions (SoHo 20 Gallery, 469 Broome Street): In "New Visions," Kellie Jones, the visual arts director of the Jamaica Arts Center, has selected work by four unaffiliated artists: Candida Alvarez, Serena Bocchino, Yong Soon Min and Lorna Simpson. Although each artist is very different, everything in the show is about identity, absence and questions.

Lorna Simpson juxtaposes four sequential written cliches, including "Is She Pretty as a Picture," "Or Black as Coal," against a photographic portrait of a young black woman seen not face on, but from the back; in the process words are drained of meaning and the image seems full and unknown. In her paintings, Candida Alvarez weaves traces of leaves and mesh and "naive" images of people into works that seem at the same time festive and wistful. In Serena Bocchino's paintings, musical instruments, such as bells, cellos and drums, hover behind a pictorial film like mementos of a paradise lost.

The most involved and moving work in the show is Yong Soon Min's "Half Home." Min uses words, images and objects to communicate what it means to have been raised in a divided Korea and then moved to the United States. The work includes tracing paper that hangs over words and images like banners. In order to read the words and see the images, the paper has to be pressed down. Making our way over the work is therefore like groping over a personal Wailing Wall. The only trace of the artist's hand is red calligraphy on the tracing paper: the effect is not only to dramatize the artist's sense of anger, difference and displacement, but also to turn the tables on us by placing us in the position of being unable to understand. (Through Jan. 17.) Ernest Shaw (Althea Viafora Gallery, 568 Broadway, at Prince Street): Although Ernest Shaw is 44 years old, he has been making sculpture for only 12 years, and he is still a young artist. His

totemic bronze and steel sculptures reflect both his scientific career - he is an M.D. - and his fascination with ritual. The works in the show, from either his "Votive," "Guardian" or "Sumo" series, can seem heavy at first, but there is a lot in them, including a light touch.

One way Shaw combats the decorative verticality of his pieces is to identify each one not only with the human figure and tribal art, but also with machines. At the same time as these sculptures stand and sit, they seem to saw, drill, pump up and down, and eat coal. Shaw also combines a problem-solving approach with a varied treatment of textures, and he looks for the unexpected detail - such as ramming steel into a head and making it look like the feathers of an Indian headdress.

"Sumo 6" is a grunting, laughing work. This huge piece of Cor-ten steel looks like a machine. But it has the heavy legs of a sumo wrestler, and it seems to squat so low that its rump almost touches the floor. The basket shape in the center, made of strips of steel, seems squeezed within the work like someone in a sumo wrestler's grip - about to become a basket case. But the basket is also held within the vise of the work like a carefully protected object that is in the process of being delicately and meticulously crafted. (Through Jan. 29.)