

ARTS • LEISURE

EXOTIC ANIMAL RESERVE — IN GEORGIA/24 CROSSWORD/26

THE GEOMETRIC CONTEXT

Two views of art stripped down to essentials

By Theodore F. Wolff

No other century has paid as much homage to geometry as ours. From roughly 1910 on, modernist painters, sculptors, and print-makers have been fascinated by the compositions that could be fashioned out of squares, triangles, circles, or lines. When Picasso and Braque invented Cubism, Russian Constructivists planned the future of Soviet art, or Mondrian sought the irreducible, it was within a geometric context. And when the Minimalists wanted to correct what they perceived as the excesses of Abstract Expressionism, they turned to the primary forms of geometry.

Two current exhibitions here illuminate this modern preoccupation: "Contrasts of Form: Geometric Abstract Art 1910-80," at the Museum of Modern Art, and "Ralston Crawford," at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The first presents geometry translated into art in relatively pure form, whereas the second indicates the manner in which it gave formal validity to one artist's depictions of ordinary objects and places.



'Watertank' (1938), by Ralston Crawford

"Contrasts of Form" illustrates the evolution of abstract art from its inception to the present. Its 158 works were selected by John Elderfield and Magdalena Dabrowski from both the 149 paintings, sculptures, reliefs, and works on paper recently given to the Museum by the McCrory Corporation and the museum's own extensive holdings in this area.

The show is divided into five historical sections: Cubism and Futurism (1911-14); Suprematism, de

Europe and America (1930-59); and Recent Non-Figurative Tendencies (1960-80). Practically everyone of interest or importance is included, from Delaunay, Malevich, Mondrian, Popova, and Picasso, through Moholy-Nagy and Klucis, to Glarner, Diebenkorn, Held, and LeWitt. The result is an intriguing demonstration of human ingenuity and proof that a dogma of formal purity can indeed produce art.

ART

At the Museum of Modern Art through Jan. 7.

Ralston Crawford

"Ralston Crawford," on the other hand, details how some of the principles of abstraction were used by a mid-20th-century American artist to fashion a highly codified and near-abstract representational style. Its 155 works constitute the first comprehensive survey of Crawford's career, and include paintings, photographs, lithographs, and drawings dating from the 1930s to 1975.

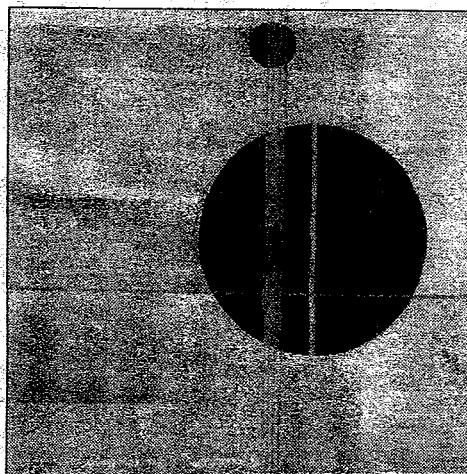
This exhibition is long overdue. As Barbara Haskell, its curator, indicates in the accompanying catalog, "Ralston Crawford remains an elusive, if not enigmatic, figure. . . . Few artists in this century have explored an unpopular style with such commitment and integrity, or have been as successful in producing so powerful and versatile an oeuvre."

As with many younger American artists after World

War I, Crawford was both fascinated by European modernism and reluctant to apply it full-strength to his own work.

Sheeler and Demuth, among others, found their solution in a sharp, hard-edged approach known as Precisionism. This stripped what was to be depicted down to its structural "essentials," and then refashioned it on canvas in a manner that was "realistic" and "abstract" in roughly equal proportions.

Crawford took to Precisionism



'Q 1 Suprematistic' (1923), by László Moholy-Nagy

depictions of factories, coal elevators, water tanks, and other industrial and urban sites and buildings began to be noticed. His first one-man show in 1937 was a success and, when Life magazine reproduced his "Overseas Highway" in 1939, his reputation was assured.

After World War II, he was chosen to document the atomic bomb test at Bikini atoll. The late 1940s found him working in an increasingly geometric manner that ran counter to the then-dominant Abstract Expressionist mode. He stuck to his guns, however, and never again deviated from his vision or his style.

He was also a consummate photographer and a competent lithographer. Examples of his work in both media are interspersed among his paintings in this exhibition. They give the viewer an insight into the sources of some of his pictures as well as a clearer understanding of the steps he took to transform starkly realistic themes and subjects into highly stylized, occasionally almost abstract images.

After its closing at the Whitney on Feb. 2, "Ralston Crawford" will travel to the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (April 19-June 1); Portland Art Museum, Ore. (July 12-Aug. 31); Akron Art Museum, Ohio (Sept. 18-Nov. 2); and Grand Rapids Art Museum, Mich. (Nov. 17, 1986-Jan. 4, 1987).

Raphael Soyer

Raphael Soyer is celebrating another birthday — this time his 86th — with another excellent exhibition.

As always, he presents us with warmly painted studies of his friends, relatives and models sitting, standing, or lying in his by now familiar studio. Everything is in keeping with his profoundly humanistic approach, as well as with his belief that art can best be made with what one knows and loves.

There are two or three exceptionally fine portraits, a dozen or so impressive figure compositions, and an informal, quickly dashed-off oil study of a young woman on a rickety bed that Degas himself wouldn't have hesitated to display.