

THE ACCEPTANCE OF HISTORY, THE BUILDING OF HOPE

Painting and Tradition as Seen in Los Angeles

By Brian Butler

Robert Kingston
at Ruth Bachofner Gallery, Santa Monica

Anton Henning
at Richard Green Gallery, Santa Monica

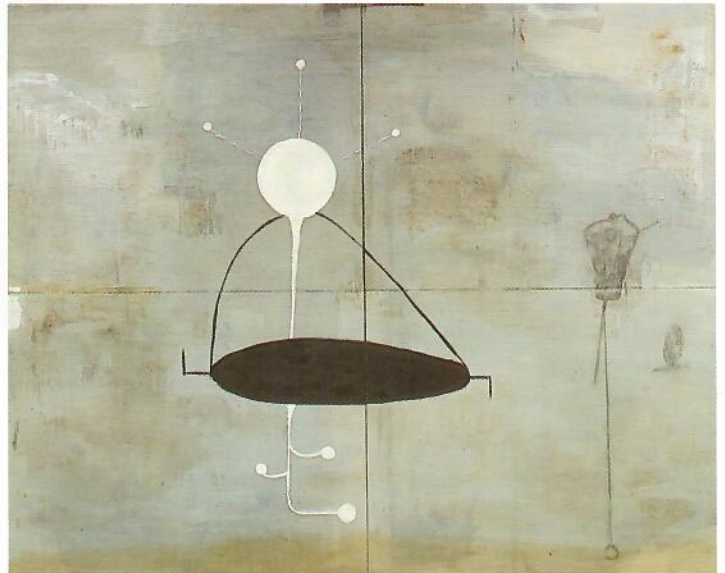
Habib Kheradyar
at Whittier College

Terry Winters
at the Museum of Contemporary Art
(Temporary Contemporary), Los Angeles

Tradition is something we cannot escape. We have no choice but to deal with its influence and constructive importance consciously and creatively or have it deal with us as an unmerciful and limiting prison. Many artists today lack the ability, the depth and the knowledge to continue the dialogue with tradition on a conscious level.

A generation of artists has been fostered that has lost its acknowledged links with the past while falling into an unsophisticated and self-indulgent cultural criticism based on themes derived from very specific historical circumstances. This ignorant, rather brutish perpetuation of highly particular images, thoughts and stances (and eliminative "nothing-but" explanations) from the past comes at the expense of connecting links with the contingencies of this generation's own history. At this point, any historical perspective or even partial self-reflectiveness would be a welcome breach in this bastion of self-certified non-historical importance, this Fortress Ahistorica.

Four painters exhibited around Los Angeles last fall — Robert Kingston, Anton Henning, Habib Kheradyar and Terry Winters — do acknowledge their links with their past,



with their history. They consciously work within a continuing and developing tradition. This brings to their paintings a refreshing, even precious depth of coherence and sophistication. Their sense of tradition informs the individual act. At the same time these painters enhance and broaden tradition through the works they offer to it. Their acceptance of history can be seen as both therapeutic — a tonic against the doctrine of a-historical auto-validity — and basically constructive medium through which they can create meaningfully.

Robert Kingston's paintings bring with them a history of self-knowledge, a knowledge of history (transcending the narcissistic confines of the artworld) and, not least important, a history of decision-making read in the paint itself. The painful and drawn-out process involved in creating each painting comes through clearly in the surface manipulations left by the decision-making process. These paintings graciously and gratefully acknowledge the wealth of modernist, post-modernist and pre-modernist influences that have created the visual and intellectual content within which they are created and must be regarded.

Kingston's paintings, with their distressed surfaces and raw, earthy colors, might seem to invoke vagueness, or even a questioning, doubting sense of despair. That interpretation would be a mistake. Yes, there is a sense of agonized execution, but this is the pain of genesis, not of doubt. In *Helmet of Mercury* we see allusions to mythology, a modernist seriousness, a modernist humor and irony as well, and painterly abstractionist space. As opposed to Duchampian diffidence this mysterious combination of apparently disparate elements implies that there are

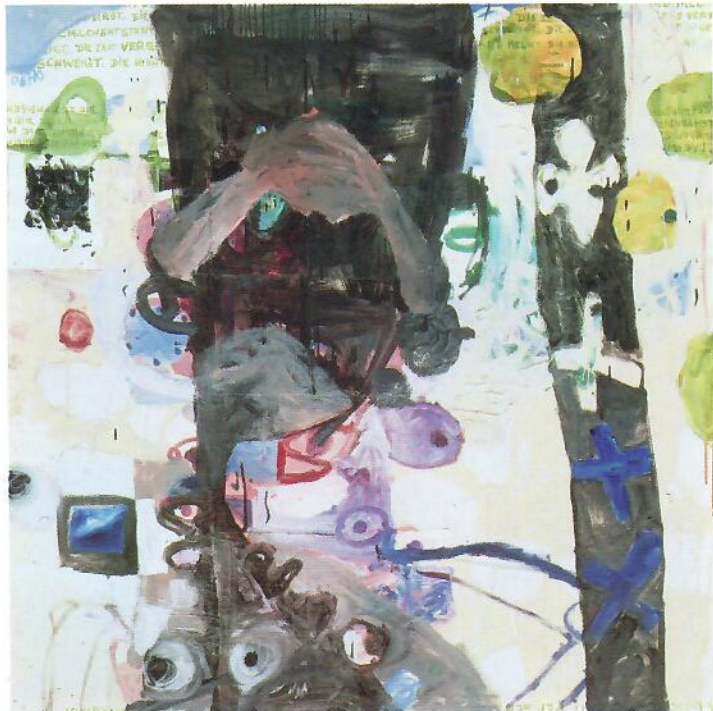


TOP
Robert Kingston, *Helmet of Mercury*,
1991, Oil on canvas, 96 x 120 inches

RIGHT
Habib Kheradyar, *The Flower is Always in the Almond*,
1991, Mixed media on wood, 72 x 192 inches

answers to be found within the canvas. Reason, value and meaning inflect the work. These traits seem to be instilled in these paintings through a deep sense of hope for some type of thoughtfulness beyond judgment, beyond mere criticism.

Like Kingston's, Berlin-based Anton Henning's painting is steeped in tradition. Both artists know their medium intimately and thoroughly. In contrast to Kingston's spare compositions, Henning's work displays an exuberant abundance of imagery. In his most successful paintings this abundance testifies to the fertile, even insane creativity of the human mind. Henning's paintings are most interestingly interpreted as homages, or as icons dedicated to the freedom to make mistakes. In *Grave of a Young and Talented Austrian* we see clearly the layers of invention and editing



Anton Henning, *Portrait of a Woman without a Necklace*, 1990, Mixed media on canvas, 71 x 71 inches



Terry Winters, *Good Government*, 1984, Oil on linen, 101 1/4 x 136 1/4 inches
Collection Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

that only an exquisitely tortured relationship to the past could create. The value of past tradition is questioned only in the act of creating the next image, the next beacon of possibility, of direction. The question is not one of rejection of validation but of selection and reorganization.

Habib Kheradyar's works, on the other hand, create a quieter type of poetic space, and as such encompass a different kind of selection. All these artists' works instill a tenor of contemplation, but, as opposed to Henning's marvelous fertility, Kheradyar's works evoke a sense of quiet depth, of a vast quiet space within each rectangle. Influences from beyond our self-imposed western cultural blinders instill a sense of intellectual resonance within the almost-opposite element of quiet grace that emanates from Kheradyar's compositions. The use of natural colors and encaustic in carefully deduced rhythmic and formal structures also encourages the (deliberately) antique feel of his work. These aspects together carry a sort of quiet sublimity that counters the nervous progressivism of our materialist, scientific society.

The fertility of painting and the fertility of the biological world conflate in Terry Winters' paintings. Biomorph shapes familiar to us in both a scientific and a formal way animate Winters' works on canvas and paper. The tortured, agonized, indeed duplicitous relationship we have with our own biological essence is explored in each work, invariably reaching a conclusion both meaningful and aesthetically powerful. Winters' painterly surface, like that of Kingston's, is, at its most successful, painfully executed and highly worked into precarious truce, a truce that is at once tortuous and seductive. The pain of the artist's toil comes through in a manner little short of heroic. Sadly, Winters' latest works seem to have lost this feeling of painful quest; they settle for easier and more predictable resolutions.

All four of these painters are witnesses to the fecundity of a powerful and (currently) almost unmined aspect of our artistic history. These works convey a sense, one recurring throughout history, of the importance of looking outward, of care for others. They exemplify a way of looking, of caring, that doesn't issue in sterile, supposedly timeless abstract concepts (e.g. justice, inhumanity, etc.) treated as obvious and unquestioned. These paintings are the works of people who actually *connect* in an intimate and heartening manner to a community broader than the isolated present.

These paintings carry within them hope for a mystery we can live and grow within, a poetic space that transcends explanation in any simplistic (and especially any reductivist) sense. Yes, the lack of a central, privileged explanation or standpoint will frustrate those who lack the openness of mind to accept it; but who is this work for, anyhow? And what is it pointing toward? While mining an historically important and relevant vein these artists are willing to work in order to create a feeling of hope as opposed to despair. They bridge the abyss between seductive but 'incorrect' painterliness and perhaps enlightening but probably boring 'correct' content. Tear down what you may in radical critique, these artists care enough to build — and that is truly a risky enterprise. ■

Brian Butler is an artist and critic living in Riverside, California.