

Nicholas Wilder, *Answer From Urbino*, center: 73½" x 46¾", sides: 48¼" x 27¾" oil on linen on panel, 1987.  
 Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

# RECONSTRUCTIVIST PAINTING

## NEO-MODERN ABSTRACTION IN THE UNITED STATES

Peter Frank

In mid-1988, Philip Johnson once again set the American architectural community on its ear, with a small but provocative exhibition of contemporary architectural projects mounted at the Museum of Modern Art. None of the architects or collaborative groups was unknown, and some, at least, had already been grouped together in other theoretical and critical shows and articles. What agitated architects and their audience — and even discomfited many of the show's participants — was not the work itself, but Johnson's presentation of it. And Johnson did indeed earn the criticism. His assembly made perfect sense — Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Coop Himmelblau, SITE, and the other participants in the exhibit do demonstrably belong together. But they do not merit the unfortunate label Johnson pinned to them: "Deconstructivism."

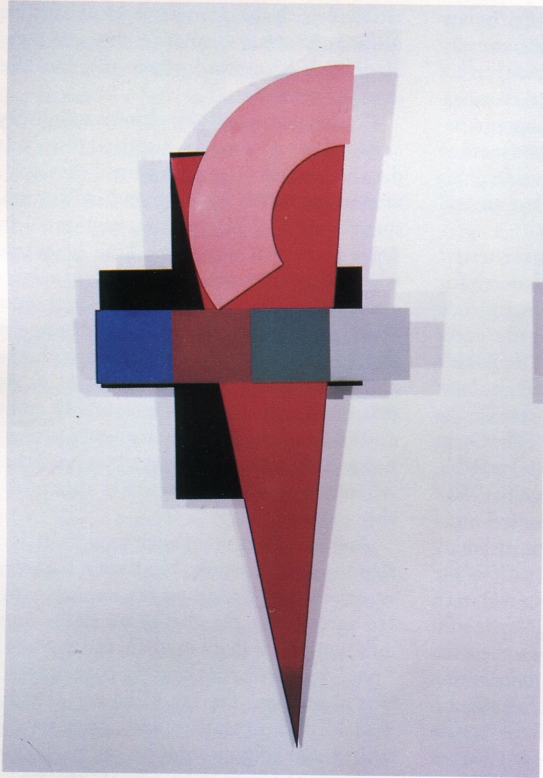
In this show of "Deconstructivist Architecture" Johnson included a prologue of Russian Constructivist artistic and architectural concepts, making it clear what he *meant* by

"Deconstructivism." But the term — a play on both "Constructivism" and the currently fashionable French philosophy of "Deconstruction" — is worse than meaningless. It is misleading. It connotes a negative, even nihilistic iconoclasm, a destructive impulse. The architects Johnson exhibited do, it is true, display a certain irreverence towards historical models and contemporary conventions — most especially towards the increasingly elaborate, pastiche-ridden excesses of what we know as Post-Modernist architecture. But these architects constitute the "next wave" in architecture precisely because they propose a *re*-building of theoretical clarity and a serious *re*-consideration of specific historical sources, even those they are wont to parody. If these architects have an argument with anything, it is with the self-conscious fussiness into which other Post-Modernist tendencies have degenerated.

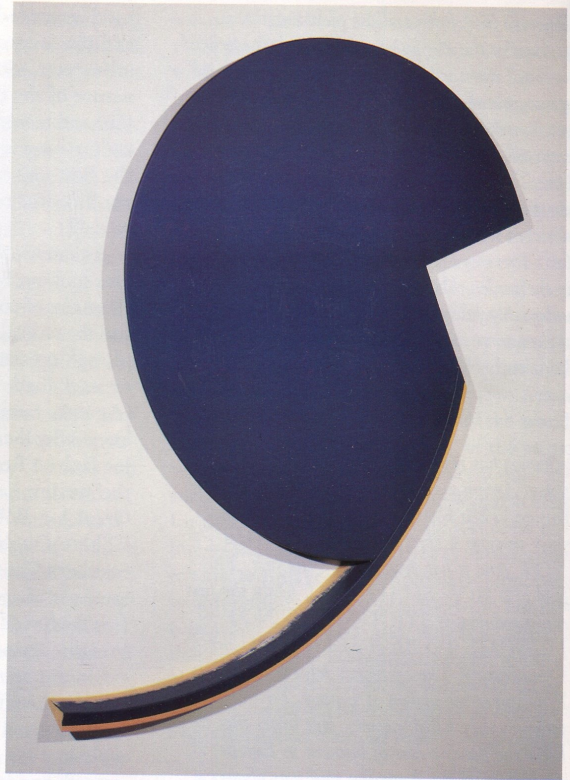
Johnson's so-called "Deconstructivists" are, if anything, *Reconstructivists*. They favorably reconsider, as Johnson (however

glancingly) demonstrated, the constructivist tendencies in the plastic arts which emerged during and after World War I; which reached an early apotheosis in post-revolutionary Russia; which were disseminated through the polemics of De Stijl and the pedagogy and practice of the Bauhaus; and which, it must be admitted, were themselves subject to degeneration — to exploitation and standardization — under the rubric of the International Style. (Johnson himself was heavily responsible for this rubric, although hardly at all for the parade of featureless glass boxes erected in its name.) These new constructivists — *Reconstructivists* — insist that the original "Constructivism" was in fact a fruitful interaction of ideas concerning the dynamics of formal interfunction. Whether promulgated by El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg, Walter Gropius, Joseph Albers, Sophie Taeuber, or Max Bill, the concepts and realizations associated with Constructivism were the result of idealistic, utopian, even transcendent thinking, thinking which, even when





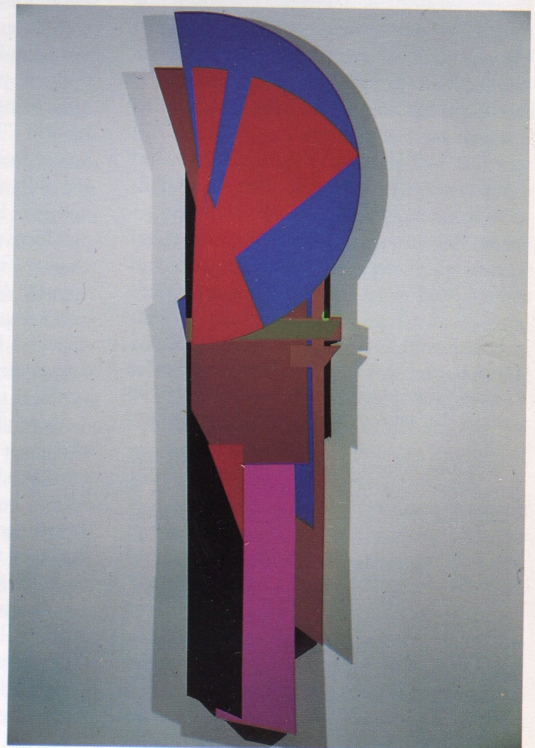
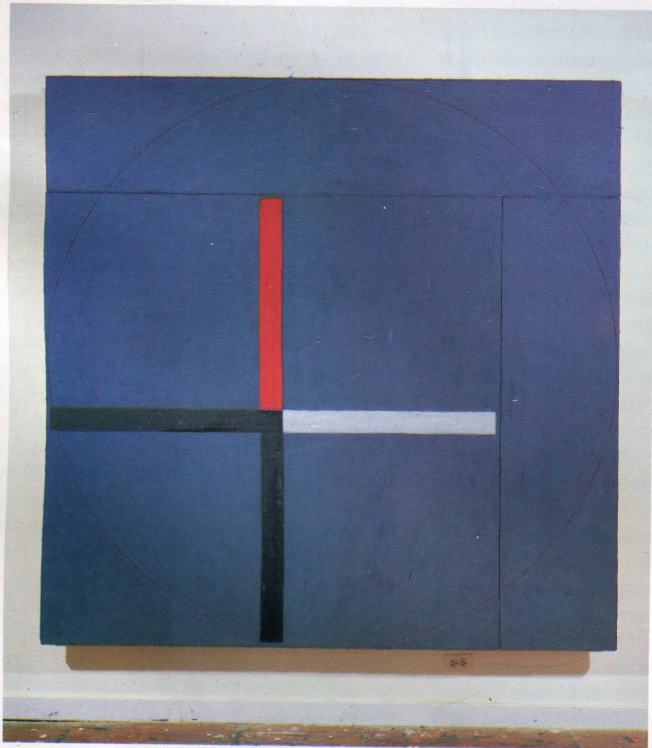
John Pearson, *Unfolding Second: C*, 78" x 35½" x 3½" lacquer on birch, 1988. Courtesy New Acquisitions Gallery, Syracuse.



Tony DeLap, *Mystic State*, 61½" x 44" x 4" acrylic, wood, 1989. Courtesy The Works Gallery, Long Beach.

Rodney Carswell, *Tri-Color Cross Encircled in 3 Gray Panels*, 88¼" x 88¼" x 4¼" oil, wax, canvas, wood, 1988. Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago and Santa Monica.

Budd Hopkins, *Guardian LVI*, 68½" x 19" acrylic on panel, 1984. Courtesy Marilyn Pearl Gallery, New York.





wholly aesthetic and impractical, served as a paradigm for social reasoning and aspiration. These latter-day "Reconstructivist" architects derive inspiration from what they see as a sensibility — or range of sensibilities — whose potential has never been exhausted. To these Reconstructivists, the original Constructivism offers our own beleaguered times a legacy of hope.

In this respect, re-adopting as they do a Modernist sensibility to contemporary circumstances and arraying themselves against the effete and often self-serving artifice of so much Post-Modernist practice, the Reconstructivist architects can be called "Neo-Modernist." They embrace new technologies, vernacular modes, and art and architectural history without basing their approach on stylistic self-consciousness. Responsive to various stylistic sources — Constructivism prime among them — the Neo-Modernists seek *formal cohesion* above all. Their concepts may seem to violate social and even physical norms, but that violation serves not to enhance the architects' own reputations or provide the public with still more spectacles, but to awaken the public to the possibilities of unconventional thinking, architectural and otherwise. Constructivism has always been a clarion call, bidding us to wake up and think clearly. Reconstructivism reiterates that reveille.

I cite all this in order to set the context for the similar, if much less focused, phenomenon of Reconstructivism in American painting and sculpture. Although they are widely scattered, in age, location, origin, and specific style, there exists a growing corps of artists around the United States who feel, as the Neo-Modernist architects do, that the practice of art in a Post-Modernist context can extend beyond the indulgence or aggrandizement of the artistic persona (as in Neo-Expressionism) and beyond the simple critique of social and aesthetic convention (as in the by-now conventional "Neo-Geo"). These artists turn to the historical model(s) advanced by the original Constructivists — Russian, Dutch, German, French, Polish, and others (even Americans) alike — because they see embodied in the Constructivist aesthetic the assertion, if not of human perfectability, then of human improvability. Today's Reconstructivist painters and sculptors, in great part unaware as yet of one another's investigations and achievements, coincidentally argue for the value of art as a *self-sustaining* and *paradigmatic* practice. They do not deny that in contemporary late-capitalist society art readily becomes commodified, and thus spiritually denatured. But they deny that this process is either inevitable or universal. Some art, at least, retains its power of moral and intellectual example.

There are, admittedly, American artists who believe and work similarly who turn not to the geometric formats proposed by Constructivism but to the gestural formats originally advanced by Abstract Expressionism; to the process/material-oriented formats associated with Minimal and Conceptual art; and even to the figurative modes introduced by the Impressionists (and modified greatly since their heyday). I do not wish to imply that American artists not working in geometric formats are incapable of believing, and managing to show, that artistic production can serve an exemplary extra-artistic function. But these other formats — not just in their original manifestations, but in their reconfigurations — have for the most part become so associated with the art market in America that their paradigmatic potential has become at least somewhat compromised. There has rarely, if ever, been a demand among American collectors for contemporary geometric art *per se*. Constructivist painting and sculpture — and by that I mean truly dynamic Constructivist work, not the outsized "International Style" bijoux which adorn countless corporate gardens across the country — has always served an oppositional role in American art. It seems to array itself against the reckless romanticism which Americans, including American artists, have always felt was an inherent aspect of artistic impulse and practice.

The continued popularity of Minimal Art, a very American movement, would seem to argue against my thesis here. But in fact, Minimal Art is *not* truly Constructivist. It does rely on basically geometric form; but it does not rely on Constructivist principles of dynamic composition. In Minimal Art, what operates is not the coordination of plastic forms on a plane or in space, but the creation of germane gestalt experiences. In Constructivist art, forms are created and arranged — *built*, as it were; in Minimal Art, forms are presented as *given situations*, with as little elaboration as possible. Minimal Art focuses, haptically, on *elements*, while Constructivist art concentrates on the *coordination* and *elaboration* of elements. Thus, Minimal Art, despite its strong intellectual foundation, is basically a romantically rather than rationally impelled movement.

This is not to imply that American Reconstructivists are themselves impelled entirely by a rational response to aesthetic, or extra-aesthetic, problems. A strong element of romanticism — whether spiritual, social, or simply diffuse — inflects all the most compelling Constructivist art, and the Reconstructivists I discuss here — sharing their countrymen's expansive yet empirical nature (which includes a regard for art as a realm of fantasy) — admit the literal impracticality

of their art, and art in general. But, unlike most (if fewer and fewer) Americans, Reconstructivist artists do not view art as ultimately frivolous. Like all but the most cynical of American artists, the Reconstructivists do not subscribe to the general American view of art as "useless." For all serious American artists, to paraphrase Bruce Nauman, art "reveals mystic truths." The Reconstructivists, inheriting a legacy of great aesthetic, and personal, rigor exercised in the name of "mystic truths," subscribe quite consciously — if not quite programmatically — to the idea of art as transcendent and exemplary.

I should emphasize the fact that American Reconstructivists do *not* share a common program. They have arrived at their individual styles separately. Their backgrounds are as varied as their locales — not all work in New York, or even California — and their reasons for adopting Reconstructivist approaches are as different as the approaches themselves. Some of the artists know one another, but no concerted group of like-minded Reconstructivists has emerged, no "Reconstructivist Manifesto" has been written, no exhibitions have as yet featured this Neo-Modernist development (although the artists I will sample here have for the most part exhibited extensively).

This is very much the American way. American artists are not prone to gather into self-consciously defined "movements." The movements we associate with the recent period of American artistic ascendancy — Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimal Art — were all defined more through critical commentary, curatorial activity, and even gallery publicity than through the artists' own efforts. Contemporary American art movements have made their point through practice rather than through polemic. In effect, the idea of art as paradigm lies at the very soul of American art. The only problem has been that, normally, the paradigms have extended only to other art activity, not to other areas of life.

The new geometricism I am calling Reconstructivism has emerged no differently — save for the fact that Reconstructivist artists have come to their mature styles while working all over the country. The growing diffusion of artistic activity in general throughout the United States allows artists to develop their own approaches wherever a university or sophisticated urban population provides a nurturing community. That diffusion also encourages artists in various places around the U.S. to react simultaneously, yet independently, to international as well as local developments. Reconstructivism has thus been forged, unwittingly but not unwillingly, by artists working from coast to coast. This Neo-Modernist assertion has been advanced



by artists in New York reacting to the historical weight of Minimalism and to the negative impact of Neo-Geo. It has been made by artists in southern California attempting to capture the ethereal effects of light and space in more plastic materials. It has been made by artists in Chicago who wish to maintain the local legacy of the New Bauhaus against the Surrealist tendencies which predominate there. It has been made by artists working in relaxed and comparatively protected academic environments who devote time to historical and theoretical research. It has been made by European emigrés who recall the dynamic aesthetic postulates of the old world in the dynamic social context of the new. And, overall, it has been made by artists of several generations, several races, both genders, and many artistic and geographic climates in response to an artistic — and social — atmosphere of economic aggressiveness and concomitant spiritual entropy. When there is more vigor in the art market than in the art being marketed, after all, it is time for a change. And the change comes best — most naturally and most encouragingly — from artists themselves.

I offer here what is in effect a spotty, if not entirely random, sampling of Reconstructivist work, mostly in two dimensions as it happens. I have come across few sculptors until now who fully exemplify the Reconstructivist tendency. But they likely exist. The choice here, in fact, is highly subjective, made not only according to personal taste, but to personal experience, and, I must admit, some expediency; with a very short time to compile this material, I may not have acquired all the best examples of this Neo-Modernist phenomenon. Still, the sampling here does convey a good sense of the range of personal approach to the Reconstructivist mode — and a sense overall of the lucidity and power which Neo-Modern abstractionists strive to achieve.

I'll commence with several Reconstructivists who have worked in such a knowingly Neo-Modernist mode for many years, artists of an older generation who until now have kept a Constructivist aesthetic alive in an unresponsive, if not hostile, artistic environment. Ben Benson, in Chicago, works on an intimate scale and with reduced color and form, ranging between a Neo-Plastic and a quasi-Cubist approach; to some extent, at least, he can be called America's Ben Nicholson. We find the same formal range in the paintings of another Chicagoan, Thomas Kapsalis. Edward Mieczkowski, who has lived and taught in Cleveland since leaving New York in the 1960s, extends his busy, asymmetric but not unstable compositional approach into three dimensions, both bas-relief and free-standing pedestal sculpture.

Elaine Lustig Cohen, still working in New York, has recalled various Constructivist movements in her art of this last decade, even honoring Russian and Bauhaus-style assemblage and photomontage. Cohen's fellow New Yorker, Budd Hopkins, was originally an Abstract Expressionist, but — following what he has deduced as the 20th century's "collage aesthetic" — Hopkins has determined a standardized shaped-canvas approach to geometric form. Another artist in New York, Richard Cramer, now applies his sophisticated color theories to more painterly, and even vaguely narrative, abstractions; but, while still living in Philadelphia (where he remains an influential teacher), Cramer realized several beautiful, rhythmic paintings and murals in an inarguably Constructivist mode. Ted Stamm may have been only 39 when he died in 1984, but the influence of his work and thought on his peers in New York gave him virtually senior stature even while alive. Stamm produced a forceful body of shaped-canvas paintings in which he evolved a Constructivist approach out of essentially Minimalist elements.

In the West, at far remove from the fashions of the New York art world, a tradition of geometric painting has pertained since the 1950s. It was recognized as early as 1959, when "Four Abstract Classicists" was mounted at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The two most influential artists in that show, John McLaughlin and Lorser Feitelson, are no longer alive, but the other two, Karl Benjamin and Frederick Hammersley, continue to work and have been important teachers. Both have continued to examine aspects of hard-edge, geometric art, and Benjamin, especially, has touched on biomorphic abstraction, proto-Minimal painting, pattern painting, and — notably in his latest paintings, composed of bevelled straight-edge color areas — Constructivism. Benjamin's fellow Californian, Tony de Lap, also exercises some influence as a teacher and as a fabricator of quasi-sculptural paintings and drawings in which simple monochrome forms subtly curve in on themselves. Besides Hammersley, the University of New Mexico faculty has also listed Garo Antreasian (who moved from L.A. to Albuquerque when Tamarind Lithography Workshop, where he was Master Printer, relocated) and Harry Nadler (from New York). Both Antreasian and Nadler favor broad, somewhat architectonic structures. Nadler's freely brushed gridwork syncopations have opened up in recent years to more expansive (if no less rhythmic) formulations, while Antreasian has long realized variations on a lively non-systemic approach, one in which curves and diagonals figure as importantly as do verticals and horizontals in the overall pictorial

structure.

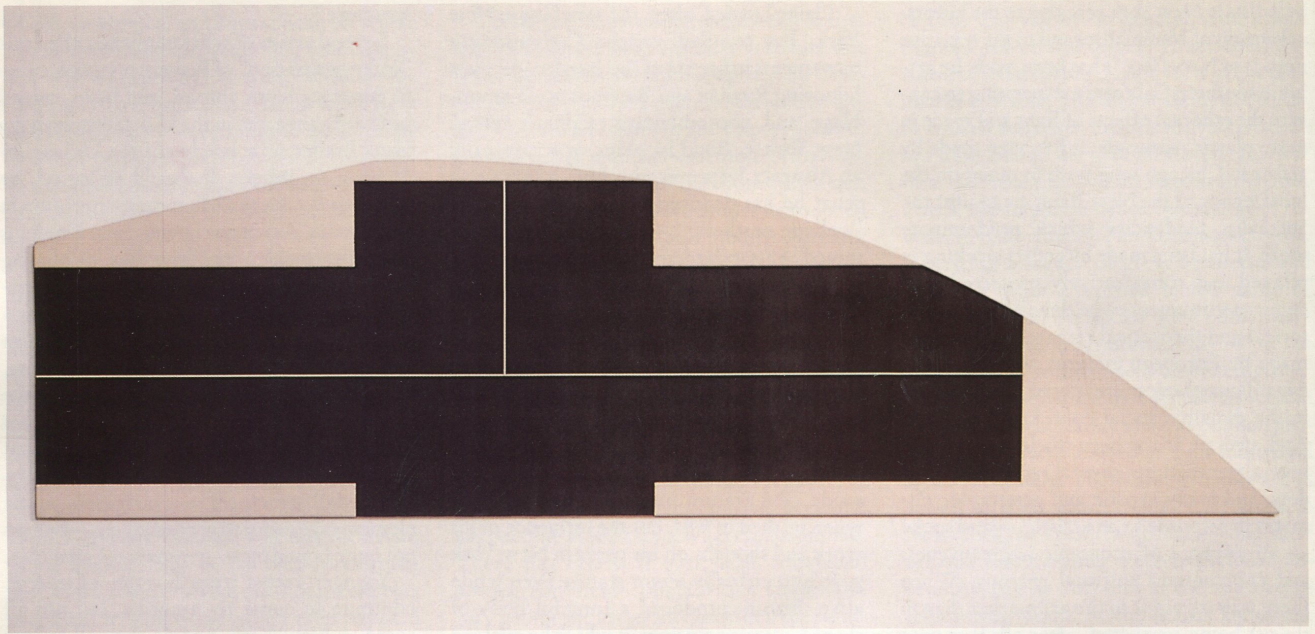
Several artists of what might be called this "older generation" of Reconstructivists came to America from abroad, and have trained both in Europe and in the U.S. German-born Hans Breder now teaches at the University of Iowa — where, it should be noted, he established America's first studio program in intermedia. A pioneer in video art, Breder is also responsible for drawings displaying mathematically-derived orbital geometricism. John Pearson, English-born and now a professor at Oberlin College in Ohio, also relies heavily on circular forms. With these, he elucidates intricate structures based on the golden mean. Kaare Rafoss lives and teaches in the New Jersey suburbs of New York City. The Norwegian native creates three-dimensional wall structures in which Neo-plastic elements are ordered according to — but are not quite bound by — symmetrical formulae.

Younger artists from Europe, of course, continue to come to America, but not all come to New York, nor do they all follow American trends. After working in London and Amsterdam, as well as her native Warsaw, Monika Malewicz — a distant relative of Kazimir Malevich — wound up in Los Angeles, evolving out of Neo-Expressionism and into a dramatic non-objective version of Cubo-Futurism. By contrast, James Juszczyk — American-born, despite his Polish name — currently practices his refined quasi-Neoplasticism in Zürich.

Neo-plastic principles motivate many younger American painters. Even though few, if any, subscribe wholeheartedly to the proscription of Piet Mondrian, his rhythmic, colorful art has demonstrated to Americans the potential of a highly delimited compositional approach based on verticals and horizontals. Some painters, such as New Yorker Helen Soreff, make essentially painterly interpretations of Neo-plastic dicta — the legacy of Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt as much as Mondrian. New Mexico painter Timothy App concentrates on pellucid form and tenebrous color, derived as much from desert light and earth as it is from a refinement of European artistic models. Don Voisine, working in Brooklyn, combines these two approaches cleverly and powerfully, bringing together a "loaded brush" with a vivid palette to recall, deliberately and sometimes humorously, Mondrian's late work.

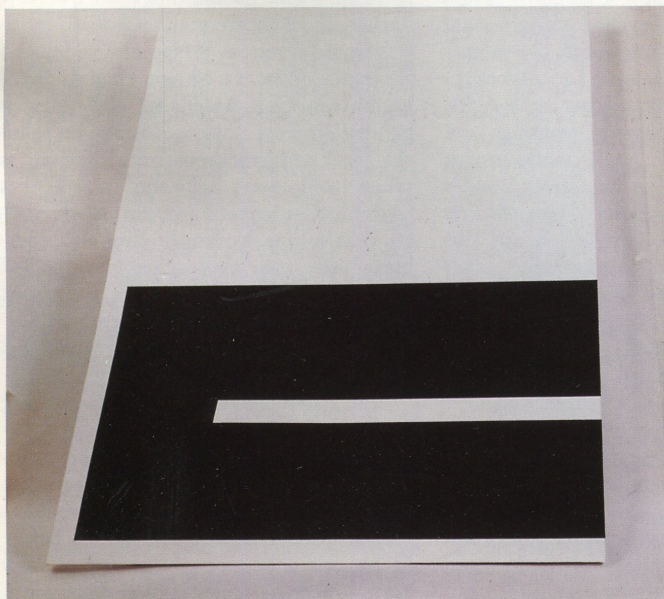
Traces of Minimalism, and of the expansive proto-Minimalism practiced by early California geometricists such as John McLaughlin, can be seen in the quasi-iconic paintings of Nicholas Wilder. Wilder was one of Los Angeles's most important gallerists before he became a painter and moved to New York, where he recently died. Very much



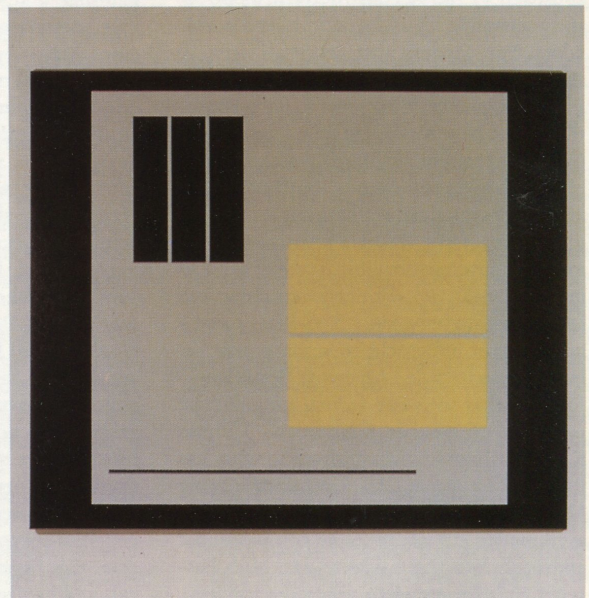


Ted Stamm, *Zyr-4*, 33" x 114" oil on canvas, 1979. Courtesy Mincher/Wilcox Gallery, San Francisco.

Li-Trincere, *Untitled*, 48" x 48" acrylic on canvas, 1988.



James Juszcyk, *Lost Yellow Reverie*, 67" x 79" acrylic on canvas, 1987.  
Courtesy Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago.



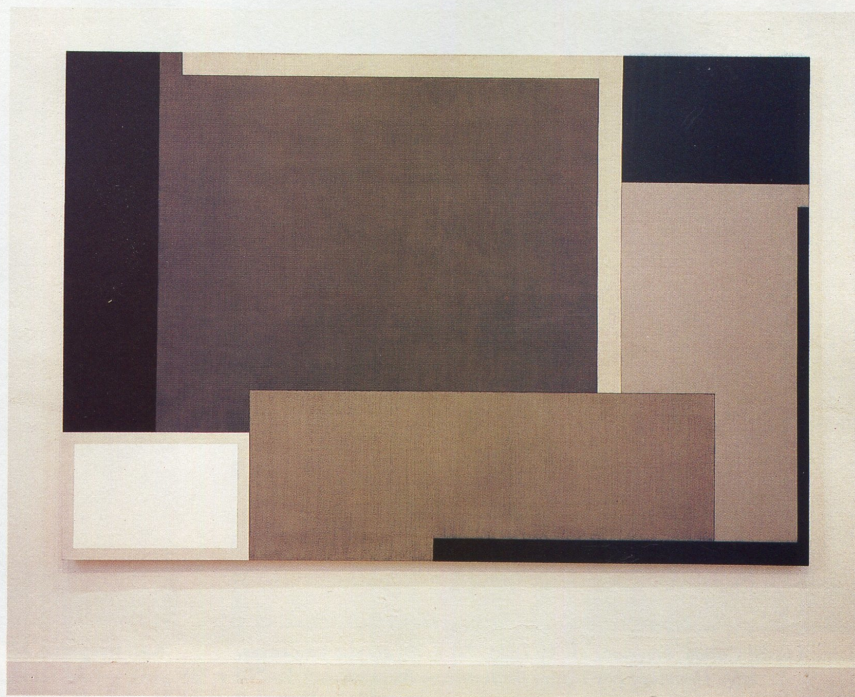


alive in New York is Li-Trincere, whose elemental approach to geometric painting reflects her understanding of Minimalism as well as Constructivism — an understanding that was shaped vitally by the example of her mentor, Ted Stamm. Bruce Cunningham also exemplifies this New York post-Minimalist Reconstructivism, working as he does with geometric elements whose formal interrelationship assumes a dynamism that belies their simplicity.

We see the same open but contrapuntal formal language in the shaped paintings of Chicagoan Rodney Carswell. Carswell's frequent use of cruciforms harks back to Suprematism; as well, it displays a strong linear emphasis which distances Carswell from Minimalism (contrasting with rather than building on Robert Mangold's approach, for instance). It also distances Valerie Jaudon, and in her current work the New York artist moves away from the Pattern Painting with which she made her reputation in the late 1970s. Now, Jaudon relies on a much more open and asymmetrical structure. Such linear dynamism inflects the intimate collages of Los Angeles artist Sharon Bell. Bell's collages, often measuring no more than 5 cm. square, clearly recall Kurt Schwitters in their application of Constructivist formal methods to scraps of paper taken from mass-circulation magazines.

If Bell's collages conjure Schwitters, those of her fellow Los Angeleno Buzz Spector — recently moved there from Chicago — refer quite deliberately, and humorously, to Schwitters' friends in De Stijl. The Vantongerloo and van Doesburg homages here should be unmistakable. Marilyn Lerner's debt to Kandinsky and his acolytes may seem similarly obvious, but is in fact much more oblique. New York-based Lerner has evolved her exquisitely balanced and detailed geometries more from her studies of Asian philosophies and cultures than from any concentration on Western sources. Fellow Manhattanite Christian Haub's equally intense, complex paintings forcefully proclaim their Western sensibility, right down to the surface sheen of those he has rendered in plastics.

Joan Snitzer, also working in New York, has come to employ similarly vivid and detailed geometric form. A hermetic but clearly recognizable aspect of sequential arrangement — a linguistic syntax applied to visual forms — determines the disposition of Snitzer's varied elements, whether in purely linear fashion or throughout the picture plane. An even more verbal — indeed, cryptically literary — approach can be found in Carol Cramer's work. Having begun in a simpler, more severe Constructivist manner — one influenced by her husband Richard — Cramer has now moved into a Kandinsky-



Timothy App, *Tranquilities*, 55" x 80" acrylic on canvas, 1989. Courtesy Linda Durham Gallery, Santa Fe.

like or even Klee-like style, inflected strongly by the popular design of the inter-war years.

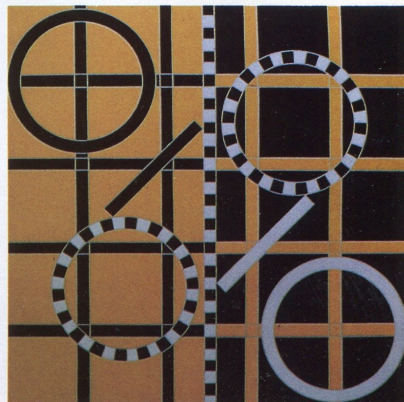
If Carol Cramer is influenced by Art Deco, and Joan Snitzer's diagrammatic works sometimes suggest architectural floor plans, we find still other Reconstructivists moving into architecture itself, however theoretical their approaches might be. Argentine-Israeli artist Osvaldo Romberg, a notable presence in the New York scene, has been evolving his wooden bas-reliefs of painted and hollowed-out shapes to the point where they pass over into architectural projects. Philip Larson worked as an architectural historian and curator in Minneapolis for many years before devoting himself full-time to his art. Larson's knowledge of architectural history — and especially of midwestern American architects Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright — strongly informs his sculpture and drawings, as in this series of Sullivan-Wright-inspired "windows." Finally, one of a growing number of artists who have been moving into the applied arts, Los Angeleno David Mocarski produces furniture whose exquisitely crafted elements, disparate as they may be, coordinate into highly workable and attractive objects.

Again, let me say that this roster by no means includes all the best Reconstructivist artists working in America today. Indeed, a number of the better-known Neo-Modern geometricists (Alan Uglow, for instance, or Steven Westfall) are absent, although they



Monica Malewicz, *Untitled*, 1989.

Valerie Jaudon, *Transit*, 36" x 36" oil on canvas, 1989. Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York.





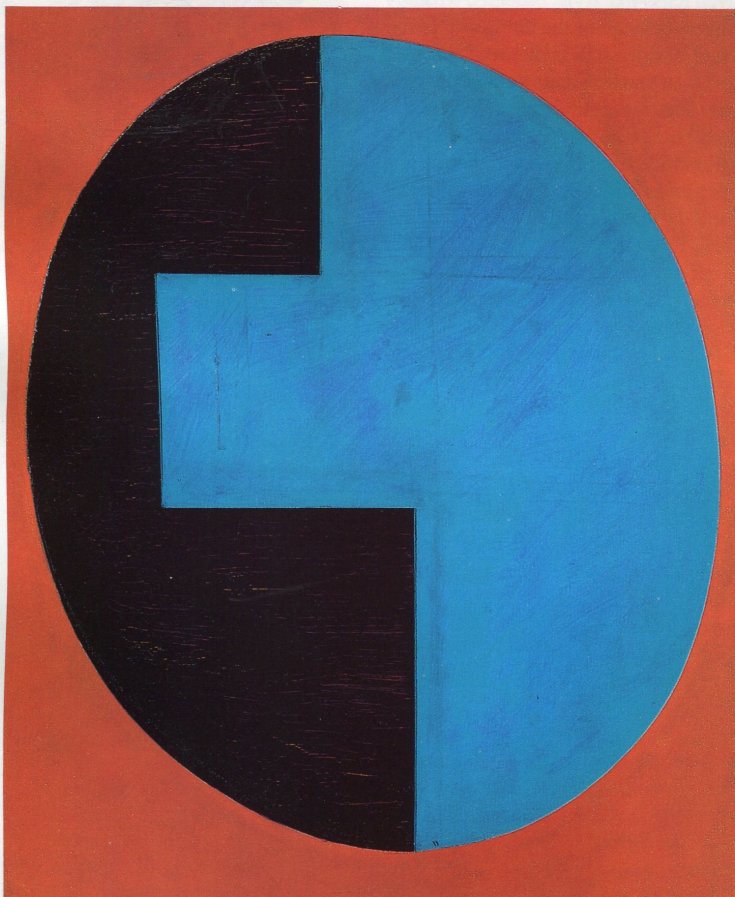


Elaine Lustig Cohen, *Fragments of Sky Light*, 72" x 72" acrylic on canvas, 1984. Courtesy Jan Turner Gallery, Los Angeles.



Karl Benjamin, #21, 60" x 60" oil on canvas, 1988. Courtesy Ruth Bachofner Gallery, Santa Monica.

Bruce Cunningham, *Untitled II*, 32" x 26" oil and acrylic on canvas, 1989. Courtesy Michael Leonard & Associates, New York.



could well have been presented, too. You should, however, have gained a sense of the variety and strength of the Reconstructivist sensibility from this sampling, a sense not of coy historicism, of artists at this end of the century simply appropriating the superficial manners of artists at the other end, but of true reconsideration, recontextualization, and synthesis, of idea and spirit as well as appearance, transferring and renewing across generations. Thanks to the formal solutions it provides and to the social paradigms it still suggests — and thanks to the artists' recognition that the Modernist ethos (aspects of it, at least) remains relevant to our times — the vast scope of Constructivist inquiry now attracts more and more artists in America — enough to constitute, however loosely, a Reconstructivist movement. □

**Peter Frank** is a curator and teacher, and serves as art critic for the *L.A. Weekly*. This essay was originally given as a paper at the Fourth Buchberg Art Symposium, "Das Gequalte Quadrat: Zum Streit der 'Geometrien' in Theorie und Praxis" ["The Tortured Square: On the Struggle of the 'Geometries' in Theory and Practice"], Kunstraum Buchberg, Gars am Kamp, Austria, June 25 1989. It has just appeared in German translation, with other papers from the Symposium, in *Kunstforum* no. 105.