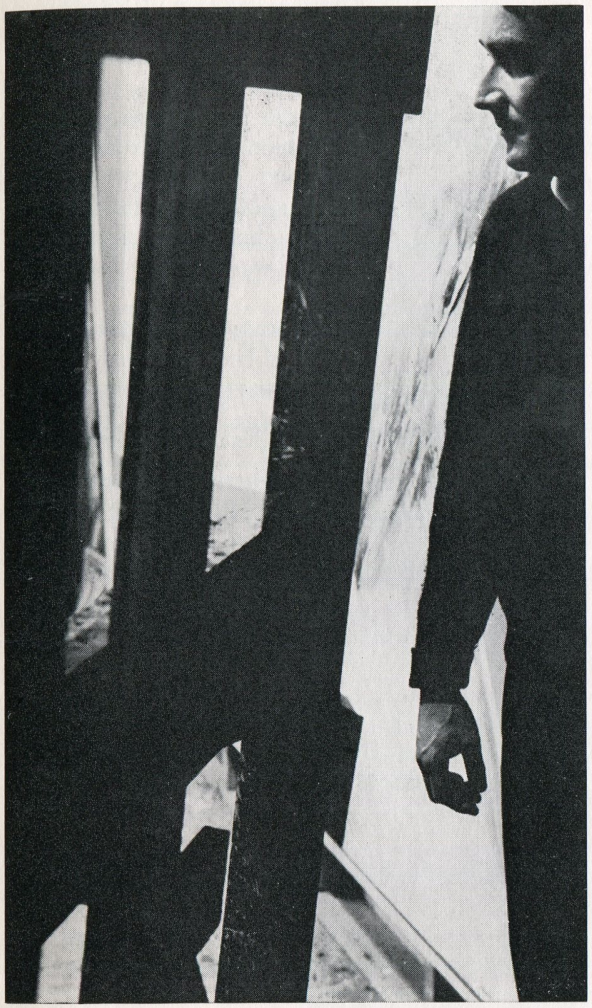
Budd Hopkins



Arnold Newman

Budd Hopkins: Recent Paintings

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OBELISK GALLERY / 130 Newbury Street, Boston, Mass.

Budd Hopkins: Master of a Movement Manqué

BY BRIAN O'DOHERTY

Years ago, when starting some research in Cambridge (England), the chief—who had put pilots in something called "The Cambridge Cockpit" during the war and given them hell—gave me some advice about sticking to your own point of view over the long haul. It's a tough program, he said, for there are fashions that demand compliance, attitudes (and immediate rewards) that are seductive, personality politics (of the mutual back-scratching kind) to be considered. If fashion veers into your solitary course use it for what it is worth, it will veer away again.

There's always the possibility you may spend your life going down a cul-de-sac, since sincerity is integral to every delusion. Intelligent self-consciousness is your only instrument with which to draw co-ordinates to confirm your position—not a powerful instrument especially in science when an odd result can tilt your universe. Eventually, he felt, this pays off in that it gives a consistency and direction to one's life. Moral survival demands this inner consistency no matter how bizarre the outward actions it determines appear. It is entirely possible that this private honesty will remain private. In the end that doesn't count. For the ego-rewards of invention and discovery are pleasant but not vital. In the truest scale of values they just don't really matter.

Partly because of this rigorous implantation of a scientific ethic I have a special feeling not for the underdog (who commands universal entropic sentimentality) but for the genuine outsider—outside the mode, the fashion, the style, the beat. Now that everyone cuts notches on themselves to measure how far they are "in," the outsider—indifferent to this chic in-out dialectic—is of even more importance. Which is what attracted me to Budd Hopkins' work when I first saw it in 1963. It left a startlingly *complete* after-feeling, in the sense that its specific forms seemed haunted by others which they had excluded. It had its own mixed sound which at that time seemed to me to fall right into an area that was puzzlingly empty: abstraction growing out of abstract expressionist ideas and practice, retaining some of both, while making connections with the past to make possible one kind of future, a future that conventional abstract expressionism didn't have. (Typically that period—early sixties—was full of quarrels as to whether abstract expressionism was "dead" or not. Its extreme apologists wanted to legislate it as a mode forever. As far as I was concerned it had, in its conventional practice, lost its immediacy and relevance. I was looking for a *transformation* in style, not a continuation.)

At that time—around 1961—the city was full of a young breed of tough guys who thought their certificates of inheritance had been stamped by Pollock and Kline and de Kooning and that the future was theirs by divine right. What happened to them is one of the unwritten tragedies of the New York Scene, a sort of *hubris* on Tenth Street. (Although the lessons of the past should have taught them that third generation inheritors, speeding down the tracks laid by the big men, always get derailed.) Pop culture and pop art, with its lethal antagonisms to and ironic put-ons of over-commitment cut them down like Easter Islanders catching measles. The inheritors of the future suddenly found themselves in a moral squeeze to which they reacted according to their nature. If they were honest, they kept up their way of life and saw those bread-and-butter red stars as often as blue moons. Others tried to graft bits of pop culture onto their beliefs and (since they had moved from the area of creation to that of recipes) mostly cultivated foolish hybrids. Some simply disinherited themselves and started out again. They started out in a different world. It is their tragedy that a taint always sticks to them, like a boyhood indiscretion in a politician's past. This big squeeze was well on when Hopkins showed in 1963.

Hopkins, steeped in the same heroic Tenth Street environment, did misread the Delphic oracles. He speaks of the heroes now with an insight their tragically blinded acolytes will never have. He likes a story Franz Kline used to tell: Pollock, drunk, was insulting some of the boys at the Cedar Bar.

GRANADA 1965 78 × 100 in.

Kline went over to tell him to cool it. Pollock got angry that Kline should tell *him* how to behave. He piled up used beer glasses in front of him as if he were going to throw them. Kline lifted his end of the table and tipped them into Pollock's lap. Pollock went ominously to the men's room, cleaned himself up, pulled the door off its hinges coming out (to get attention), roared and slowly stalked Kline. They met in the center of the floor and Kline, who was stronger, hurled Pollock against the bar, where he hurt his back. Pollock roared again and came back. As they struggled Pollock whispered to Kline "Not so hard, Franz, not so hard." (Though the times are now hard on such a gun-slinger self-image, it isn't just to be laughed at —it enabled him, and others, to paint the kind of pictures they did paint; illusions so passionately believed in can become facts.)

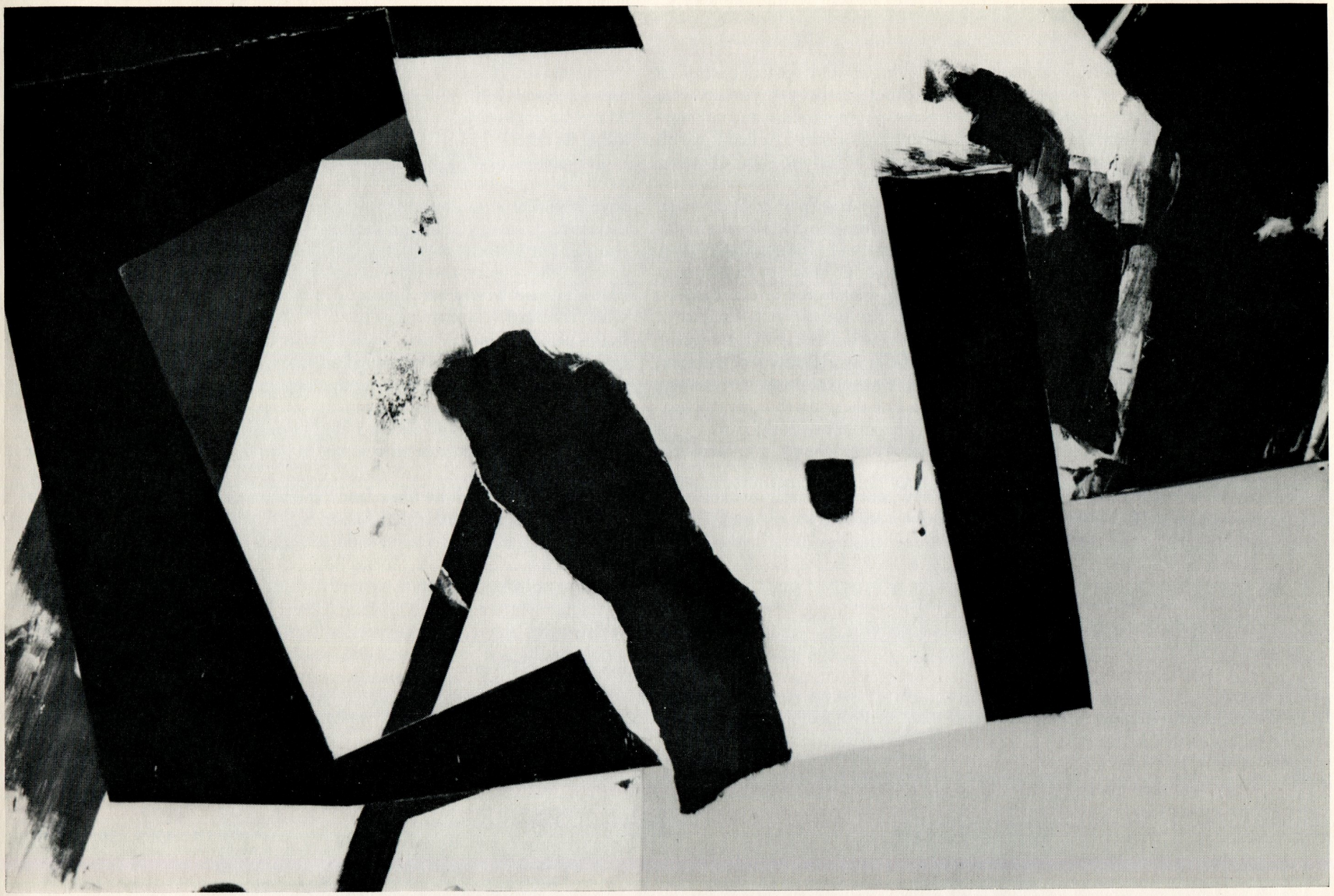
Hopkins is the only one of his third generation (born around 1930) who heard the "Not so hard." He was able to experience the abex (as Alfred Barr shorthands abstract expressionist) romantic agony, and then step outside it to correlate it with his own tough quietism. For this is the split that his art arches over in images that are as diverse in means as they are classically unified in mood. This was the main point of the 1963 show which I'd called post-abstract expressionist because it wasn't in the vein of the young inheritors (who examined each others brush-strokes like tea-leaves in a cup). It brought seemingly antipathetic ideas (hard-edge shapes, expressionist strokes) together. This was what I was tuned in to expect (or recognize), but by this time the hounds and horses were off view-hallooing after the bright new things of pop. Although I had been fed acres of instantly confected abex mediocrity in 1961 and '62 (which seemed summarized by the servicable abstraction created with a rolling pin in Jack Gelber's *The Apple* and then auctioned off to the audience right out of the play), I felt, perversely that the abex potentials for development were being neglected. I was also aware that art in America had been totally subservient to its socio-economic background—movements were scissored off when the banks closed, or politicians went isolationist, or the mass media jumped on their back. I was hoping for some continuities, not quite satisfied then, that Pop, in its ricochet opposition to every abex position was a genuine continuity.

Hopkins wrote about this development—in 1960—before he was able to paint it. "Art is the visual expression of the painter's sense of life. At its deepest it is the harmonious combination of the artist's final dream and his sense of reality. And if this involves contradictory feelings, everything must finally be harmonized and serene." Hopkins' delicate suturing of opposites comes from his genetic imprints, from temperamental necessity. The rest of this statement is full of good things and is worth quoting. "I work for clarity and precision, yet the painting must finally be mysterious and indefinable. It must express structure, order, the marks of overall controlling intelligence, yet it must be alive, free, spontaneous; the ruled edge and the improvised, accidental line, together and harmonized. I like neither extreme in art wholeheartedly—neither the purified world of geometrical art, nor the free, indulgent world of expressionism.

"There is a central tradition in modern art. It is based solidly on Cezanne (not Monet) and includes within it most of cubism, the great, structured early Matisses, and some of the recent American abstract painting. The art in this tradition is *whole*, yet ultimately serene, precise, haromnious. These are goals I have set for myself."

The work up to this time (1960) is full of the voices of the Gods—Guston (delicate knottings and knittings), Kline (large thunderous areas of force), de Kooning (color, and the sense of the loaded brush dragging, flashing, studying its own trail). For all its ventriloquized romanticism this amalgam is a disguise. For insistent hard edges briefly line themselves up against free rhythms, check a movement, potentially splinter it, and sometimes, by sharpening an edge, cut and tilt an area into another kind of space (Avalar, 1960 or Lasemann, 1958). (Guston noticed these ambiguities in Hopkins' 1959 show at Zabriskie and mentioned them to him.) These contrary spatial signals, in their checks and hesitations, give notice that his art was struggling, like an organism, to divide itself and grow through diversity into another kind of unity. It is not surprising that the 1963 show has actual letters gelled in the midst of the pictures' motions and rotations, letters as *objects* which, as with some early Cubists and Stuart Davis, are signs of composite and contradictory ideas being working out side by side.

CADIZ 1965 50 × 74 in.



I still think of this development in Hopkins around 1963 as part of an aborted movement, a quiet bit of artistic technology that many artists were testing when the pop-men, their press-agents, photographers, and columnists (not that I object to any of these—except press-agents) rushed through the studios, propelled by the unstoppable force of history—and of course most people can't refuse joining a crowd rushing to a happy appointment with both destiny and chic. Perhaps the prototype of the particular development I mean is in some of Hans Hofmann's paintings in the Kootz exhibition of January 1962. In this show he experimented (though that's rather the wrong word for Hofmann who makes even his mistakes with radiant conviction) with textured, luminous rectangles anchored in expressionist strokes, an intention later carried to spectacular success. It is hard now, though only a few years have passed, to understand the daring of introducing contrary linear elements, with their superficial connotations of stability, order, purism, into the abex flux. Actually, it was an admission of history, a looking-around the monolithic exclusivity of abex and thus, by implication, routing it to a siding while making connections with the past.

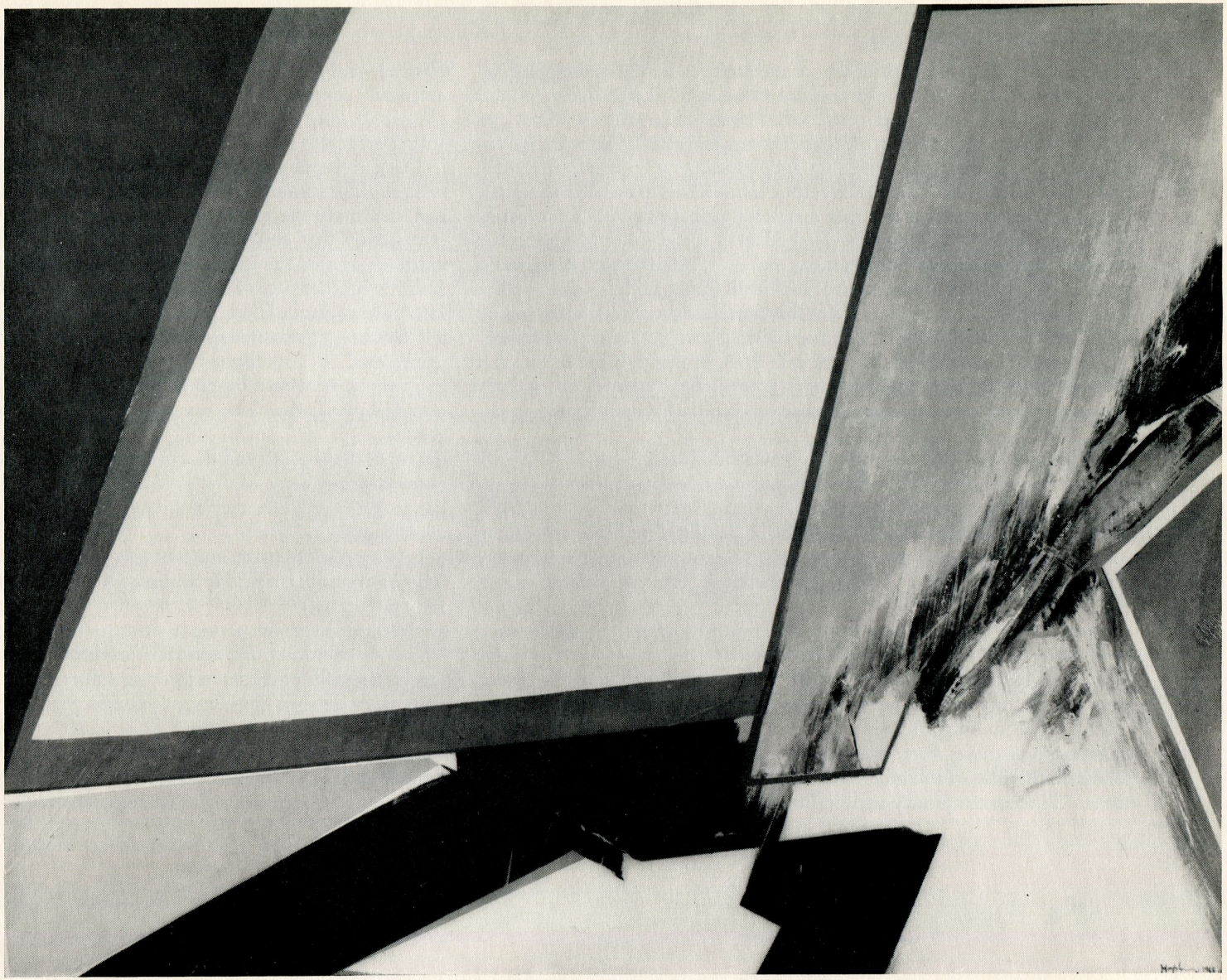
It had been done before—like most things in modern art, you can find a precedent if you search, although many people don't realize that that very search is in itself an action defining the new, not showing it up as old stuff in drag—although in a way every innovation is more or less old stuff in drag. (A rapid sketch of precedent would include Renoir's classical hang up and the hard-edge—soft-stroke dichotomy it provoked; also Kandinsky's transitional phase from expressionist stroke to sharply defined shapes.) But it was the immediate abstract expressionist context that gave it its particular savor in the early sixties, the "permissions" of that context it exceeded.

Following this idea, I looked around for other artists who seemed to be doing the same thing. Frank Roth was—sort of. In group shows I happened across canvasses by Robert Ryman which initiated a dialogue between brushstroke (treated with object-like impersonality) and geometry, but he abandoned this idea after a few pictures. Later I found that Albert Brunelle, in 1962, had done some excellent work of this nature, had shown it to nobody, and then discarded it while he went on to the idea then becoming dominant—of art as an invention that works. As a movement it seemed stilled before it had really got itself born. (Although I guess one could read Al Held's cinemascope geometry drawn into lumpy, thick surfaces, as fulfilling its criteria.)

So Hopkins' new show is fascinating for carrying these ideas through to a conclusion, demonstrating one possibility of what that movement might have been. The scumbles and strokes are less frequent than in the 1963 show, their sum of energy exactly measured (as in Gottlieb's later calligraphs) so that this free element can be manipulated as a *unit* i.e. as an object or shape among other objects and shapes. Sometimes paint fans out from geometric edges, like snow whipping off an Alp (and rather like Norman Bluhm's white curtains). The flatness of the canvas is deeply compromised by tilts in the planar geometry that, bending it in and out, creating open corners and flanges, produce almost shaped canvas effects. Some of these geometric shapes are "arbitrary" as some of the shapes in the new simplified sculpture (whose precedents are in painting) are arbitrary—once a kiss-of-death word now complimentary and almost synonymous with invention.

Take the white, bifurcated pennant in "Strike White" and you can see how, interlocking with the yellows, stresses and warps are placed on it so that the picture, lifted by those landscape blacks, zig-zags in and out like a carefully adjusted spatial concertina. Along the edges starts and flares of light and dark suspend and accentuate the action, which is stabilized by a red at the right lower corner. In "Strike Blue" there is a deep diagonal cleavage from top right to lower left that tries to fold the picture over—again diverted by staccato darks and lights clicking leftward at a different tempo from the yellow shape above, that majestically flares out in a smooth move leftward too. You can pick out the same deep spatial fissures and turn-table twists in "Yarmouth" and "Granada." Occasionally (e.g. "Chicago") the plane geometry creates an abstract stagespace in which a spatter of strokes makes a sharply focussed gesture, spontaneous and studied, like an actor's. If you examine this seemingly free patch of expressionism you can see how carefully the strokes mask within them a structure which shifts planes in an echo of the hard surrounding shapes. In contrast to this main pre-occupation with

YARMOUTH 1965 79 × 101 in.



illusory violations of flatness, a few of the pictures are flat as diagrams, all consciously set on one tissue-paper-thin plane, e.g. "Red August." Color shows a somewhat parallel division. Sweet contrasts (usually of yellow and light blue) play against sour off-key dissonances (usually between green-red-dark blue contiguities) which produce a feeling rather like that of chalk grating on blackboard. In summary, the change seems to be from the classic balances of the 1963 show to rather mannered ambiguities that superficially cancel the classical idea. Yet the final effect is mainly one of repose and solution, the feeling of "both familiar and new" maintained, as he wants them to be, simultaneously. What Hopkins is doing with his planar shifts from frontality, sweet and sour color, his expressionist residue mixing it up with "purist" vocabularies of line and curve, is using mannerist complexities to arrive at resolutions that are still classical, through the means that produce them are not. The end-result is thus slightly jarred off, slightly unfocussed by this odd relation of means and end. This may be the expression of what he means when he says, "I work for clarity and precision, yet the painting must finally be mysterious and indefinable."

The corollary of this also holds for a few of the oddest pictures that present themselves as straight and symmetrical when in fact they are cunningly skewed off symmetry. The "Red Emblem Painting" (a black cross hung lozenge-wise that seems like a design for 1984 armbands—in this rather like a stripped-down version of Marsden Hartley's "German Officer" series) and "Tarlac" are classically simple and appear to present audacious symmetries. Yet these are the ones that finally refuse to "solve" themselves and settle into classic repose. Which brings one into the currently very active area of ambiguous masking of purist devices, in which squares, circles, triangles etc. are simply not absolutes, but surrounded by adjuncts and attitudes that mobilize them into units as personal as brushstrokes under the geometer's disguise. Peter Hutchinson, in a provocative article, has introduced this idea of using classical simplicites to express mannerist distortions. "The contemporary mannerist attempts" he writes, "in seemingly classical work, to make us reconsider purism . . . abstract mannerism can be extremely complicated while maintaining an outward simplicity. The complication is inferred, intellectual, where in previous mannerist work it often was expressed as detail."

This development in Hopkins' work—mannerist modes producing classical, slightly romantic, resolutions; classical modes finally producing unrest, is exactly the kind of traffic through a psychological mid-point of intersection that could be expected from one who constantly plays the extremes against the center, who commits one part of himself totally but reserves another part of himself to check constantly on his position. Hopkins' firm control of these precarious variables is the end-result of an unusually consistent growth, a gradual evolution that is itself an act of faith in his own sound, his own beat, when the rest of his third generation confreres copped out, or went a bit nuts checking in one self-image and then finding out the new suit they were wearing was Dejanira's coat. His path runs from abstract expressionism to sometimes parallel certain cool ambiguities and shapes of the present, and that progress is logical every step of the way. It's about the only route of that particular kind there is, a path beaten through the undergrowth of a very real jungle that never became a smooth macadamed highway.

It is for this essential honesty that I like Hopkins—a cagey enthusiast whose ambitions are strictly subjected to complete inner directional control. He is not the sort of fellow you are going to read about in the glossy columns where kookiness and personal charades are the usual price of admission. This is a good thing. His art is self-protected from all that while it quietly creates a system of values of its own, values that can't easily be taken away from it. As he says, "You've got to find a ground you can stand on without that ground being taken away from under you by change, fashion, anything." One way of surrounding your own turf is by means of that consistency I spoke of at the start, the consistency that gives inner meaning to a life, and to the paintings spun off along the way.