

TEN
DOWNTOWN

It's always interesting to find out whether the home, the original context of the art work, will add anything to one's understanding of the art. Yet in the end it really doesn't make any difference, because, even though meeting the artist creates a strong impression, the work itself stands alone. The participants of this year's "Ten Downtown"—Lucy Hodgson, Jennifer Johnston, Arthur Natale, Mary Petruska, Morris Shuman, Claire Seidl, Kathy Stark, Gladys Tietz, Ted Thirlby, and Joan Witek—are all individuals with a character of their own. Yet amidst the diversity, I was surprised how easily one could make sensible generalizations about the art as a whole.

All of the artists, including the representational work of Mary Petruska and Lucy Hodgson, shared a common penchant for abstraction, for using a flat, all-over, grid-derived pictorial structure. The primary interest of Mary Petruska's precise pencil portraits was in locating her subject within an architectural environment so as to give her subject a geometric framework. Her painted nudes exist in an abstract environment. Lucy Hodgson's

black and white relief etchings are arranged within a grid pattern in order to create a series of interchangeable units. Kathy Stark also uses a grid structure, but for painterly purposes. The geometric armature allows her to concentrate on the density, the texture, and the stroke of the brush mark. She's a fine colorist, particularly in the way she uses a painted ground to set off the final layer of brushed pigment. I like the fact that Hodgson doesn't print her etchings in "editions."

The three men in the exhibition, Arthur Natale, Morris Shuman, and Ted Thirlby, were all sculptors. Shuman and Thirlby both work in a tradition ultimately derived from Constructivism, but their drawings are something else. With only a couple of gestures on an empty white page, Thirlby makes sensitive, charged drawings that reveal the *raison d'être* of his wall sculpture. His sculpture, made from wood and plastic, is geometric, linear, and subtle in its spatial relationships. Morris Shuman, who was Tony Smith's assistant for a number of years, creates, out of black ink, impressive gestural drawings which add to the meaning

of his relief sculptures. His sculpture reflects the specific physical action that went into its making.

One had the overall impression that all of these artists had inherited a formal structure that was no longer responsive to the instinctual content that they felt the need to express. Thirlby seemed to accept the idea that his forms had a symbolic, inner value. The strong expressionistic undercurrent throughout this "Ten Downtown" was explicit in the work of Arthur Natale, Claire Seidl, and Gladys Tietz. The colors in Seidl's acrylic paintings are unabashedly bright and vibrant, applied in a loose painterly manner. Nevertheless, she also maintains rectangular formal divisions for her paintings. Gladys Tietz, who is involved in the physical manipulation of many different kinds of materials and processes, creates abstractions that suggest the kind of illusion found in Surrealism. She is aware that this kind of physical manipulation of material turns form into a removed, private space. Jennifer Johnston works in black and white on paper. Her work, though abstract, also creates an illusion where forms, like ruins in a

landscape, emerge from a black sfumato. Johnston, like Tietz, builds up dense textures with her materials.

The outstanding paintings of Joan Witek are reflections on black. She uses black as if it were a medium of light and illusion, to the point where black begins to verge on silver. In Witek's loft there was a beautiful, dark reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* whose protective glass frame not only mirrored the depth of Leonardo's painting but evoked the mood of Witek's paintings. Though her paintings bear a resemblance to Reinhardt, in practice her use of black is different. She uses black exclusively, as a medium in itself. Johnston and Hodgson also rely on the resonance of black. Witek arranges her blacks within rectangles or crosses.

All of these artists, with the exception of Natale who lives in Soho, live either below Canal Street on the West Side or in the 20s near Chelsea. All of them live in lofts, which is what one expects from the public character of modernist art, yet the art was mostly private and intimate in character. (Ten Downtown, April 22-23)

Valentin Tatransky