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ARCHIVES | 1977

Art: Warhol's Hammer and Sickle

By JOHN. RUSSELL JAN. 21, 1977

WHOEVER first mated hammer with sickle knew what he was doing. Quite apart from the associations of strength and dexterity, industry and agriculture, the flat hard blow and the sweeping movement from the shoulder, the hammer and the sickle are themselves objects of beauty.

So Andy Warhol has in esthetic terms a motif of inexhaustible interest in his new paintings, which are on view at the Castelli Gallery, 420 West Broadway, through Jan. 29. He has taken the hammer and sickle out of politics and into a world in which a resourceful fancy is combined with broad effects of color and texture. His hammer is a broadnosed, clublike object; his sickle, a high-arching form that tapers to a point that is very sharp indeed. This hammer can rear up like a detail from a blown-up color photograph of a decaying tooth; this sickle takes off from the bottom of the picture like a rocket and in time returns gracefully to earth, undamaged.

Politics cannot be banished entirely from this image, of course. But even if Mr. Warhol is not exactly in the forefront of the international labor movement he can certainly claim the status of an experienced (he is 50 this year) and industrious workman. In these new paintings he has taken something from sculpture (Calder's stabiles, Claes Oldenburg's giant variants of household objects), something from architecture (from the towers of San Gimignano to the World Trade Center), and something of painting (spreading the color as a schoolboy spreads jam on his first day at summer camp) and come up with an end-result that combines imagination with punch. Happy birthday!

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Other shows in the galleries this week:

Inaugural Show (The Drawing Center, 137 Greene Street): Martha Beck's new Drawing Center has opened with an ideally stringent survey of contemporary drawing. This is not drawing as it was conceived of by Ingres and Degas, but drawing as it is practiced by today's avant garde: as the locus, that is to say, of freehand experiments that are conducted primarily in terms of pencil on paper.

“Primarily” is the important word. Douglas Sanderson works for instance with “an incised nail” on paper covered with oil paint. James Bishop's delicate work notes take the form of very small paintings in which a word surfaces here and there. Ralph Humphreys comes up with encrusted reliefs in which a particularly outrageous color-sense is pre-eminent. Dorothea Rockburne's characteristically beautiful series is as much flooded as drawn.

So it is left to Robert Mangold to argue: the case for the pencilled line. When he takes three tall rectangular sheets of paper, and uses them as a single ground on which a square and a triangle are made to cohabit, the task turns out to teach us quite a lot about the function of design and the nature of human feeling. This is a very good show and the long thin room with its soaring white columns is a work of art in itself. How well they wrought, those industrial architects! Through Feb. 13.

Paul Thek (Brooks Jackson Gallery Iolas, 52 East 57th Street): Paul Thek the master of the three-dimensional daydream has been too long absent from the galleries in New York. His new sculptures are ethnographical in tone and look like the leavings of an extinct tribe that had a great deal of bronze to play with. “The Personal Effects of the Pied Piper” is one of Mr. Thek's collective titles for the show, which is built of the kinds of object that, we should expect to find, around the camp fire if the Pied Piper had coaxed all the mice out of Manhattan and up into one of the nearer State Parks

There is for instance the Piper's own place-setting: knife, fork, spoon and flute lined up side by side. There is a “rosary bowl” filled with objects never cast in bronze before (among them a wishbone, an apple core, some snail shells, a half-eaten cherry and a pretzel). There is a lantern in the form of a slice of birthday cake with a candle inside it, and there are ebullient mice by the dozen. The Pied Piper himself has stepped out for a while, but his campsite is well worth a visit, and it's there through Feb. 5.

Paintings and Sculpture by Betty Parsons (Kornblee Gallery, 20 West 57th Street): Mathematically speaking, Betty Parsons is one of the senior stateswomen of the New York art world; but in her sculptures she has the imagination, the speed of wit, the sense of fun and the readiness to try anything that we associate with very young people who have more gifts than they know what to do with. These sculptures start from the surrealist tradition of the object found and transformed, formed: driftwood, broken or worn-out pieces of household equipment; the debris of a society on the move. From these odds and ends, Mrs. Parsons fashions a campanile, a sentry on watch, a medal to be pinned somewhere on a panoramic bosom. She then adds color. And how that color sings! The white walls dance to its tune. Through Feb. 3.

Tim Scott. (Tibor de'Nagy Gallery, 29 West 57th Street): Few living sculptors have a more complex set of allegiances than Tim Scott. Schooled in England under the influence of Anthony Caro, he has traveled widely in the Far East, has a Singhalese wife and is the son of an authority on Chinese and Japanese classical drama. His great gifts have never been in doubt, and his current retrospective at the museum in Edmonton, Alberta, demonstrates a rational progression, group by impressive group, that ranges from open-form Caro-esque metal structures to monumental pieces that are made up primarily of transparent plastic. and look like the advance guard of a skeletal armada.

Not long ago Scott was invited to teach at Bennington, and in a brief but intense sojourn in the workshops there he produced a group of, sculptures in quite another mode. Four of them form his present show. Built largely of bolts and battens of cold rolled steel, with spherical and cylindrical shapes to thicken the plot, they have a grim cogency which is quite new in Scott's work. These tough, succinct, thoroughly thought-through pieces establish Tim Scott as one of the best sculptors around — here, there, or anywhere. Through Jan. 27.

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A version of this archives appears in print on January 21, 1977, on Page 57 of the New York edition with the headline: Art: Warhol's Hammer and Sickle.

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