

volving surface plays while the childish but intelligent voice of the artist's seven-year-old daughter intones a stunningly over-written text. The gist of it is that, before she could talk, the girl knew her father would come to the limits of his possibilities. These limits are equated with the edge of the carpet, the edge of art, the edge of the knife the artist has plunged into his own effigy. The daughter, by understanding this and by explaining it over and over to the image of the slain artist, is supposed to carry into the future whatever Oppenheim did achieve. However, with a truly Gothic frisson, one bears the seven-year-old say that she too is drawn to the edge, to the destruction Oppenheim's theatrics suggest are the result of all art. Ungovernable forces are indeed at large if they can seal the destiny of a young child. Oppenheim doesn't ask one to suspend disbelief in his melodramatic contrivances, yet he still draws on them with great success to raise questions about artistic individuality, the art audience and the future of both. —Phyllis Diefner

Harmony Hammond at Lamagna

Although Hammond's format is now different, the content of her new paintings and her use of warm, luminous tones have clearly developed from her earlier work. In her first show she exhibited pieces she referred to as "presences"; these were almost human in form and sometimes also in scale, made from torn rags dipped in paint and then worked over wire hangers. In addition to these hanger "figures" she made painted rag "bags." Both had a fierce, somewhat ritualistic sensibility. These qualities continue to pervade the new work. Hammond flattened out her constructions in a subsequent group of works that included woven baskets, sandals and brightly colored, circular hooked rags. The recent paintings share this same sense of texture and materiality.

Her canvases are smallish, ranging from 11 inches to 4 feet high. Several are long horizontals, referring more in scale to Indian bark paintings (which are naturally limited in size) than to conventional contemporary paintings on cotton duck (which can be stretched over a wood frame to any size). Her paintings suggest color swatches or sections from a vast fabric. The surfaces look woven and have a fabric-like weightiness; they are rich and mottled, built up with thick layers of oil and wax and impressed in a herringbone pattern. Their variation of color and texture is mysterious: it is difficult to tell if the ultramarine blue, for example, in a particular canvas pulsates from beneath, with layers of paint scratched off in order for it to peek through, or if the electric quality of the blue is actually on the plane closest to us; or in another work, if the chalky white was swept over the painting at the last moment or is an underlayer. There is often this physically ambiguous play between color which comes from beneath and the equally strong hues which bounce directly off the surface. All the paintings are held together by an all-over, somber ground against which her clear, earthy pigments dance. They have a determined solidity, and an insistent presence. In the best paintings the texture and shape

merge, exuding a prickliness and penetrating heat.

In the same exhibition, and somewhat like an enormous footnote, Hammond also showed a large, free standing piece, an antique oak cabinet placed in the center of the room. Its drawers were partly open and contained, like exhibits in an archeological museum, half-hidden bits of what look like ancient baskets and pot shards (though Hammond actually made them). The top of the chest displayed more clay-like objects, imprinted with rope and string.

Typewritten notes explaining how women were the first makers of baskets and pottery accompanied the display; in addition, a xeroxed statement was given out which deals (rather poetically) with ideas about fragments and wholes, and about Shamanism. This particular aspect of her presentation seemed didactic and overly theatrical to me. I wish Hammond would keep the proselytizing to herself: too much explaining seems to diminish the strength of her work, especially the paintings. —Barbara Zucker

Ralph Humphrey at John Weber

For nearly 20 years Humphrey has been showing variations on the quietly textured monochrome canvases. His quietude is perhaps the sign of an unrelenting concentration, as he attempts to use the literalism of post-War painterliness to pin down the quality of certain intangibles. In 1974 he said that in all his paintings "the past is lost, and yet in an odd way it isn't, because something is caught. But what is caught is not so much the past as its proof, its actuality. It's almost like time has been objectified somehow and I've made it concrete." While first-generation abstractionists like Still and Rothko may have been trying to make the canvas a record of a psychological confrontation, Humphrey has used some of that generation's stylistic traits to confront time and its complexities rather than those of his own interior state. Elsewhere in the statement quoted in part above, he claims widely experienced emotional meaning for this transformation of first-generation esthetics: "The object becomes a meditation on time, space, and light. These and their translation into emotions may be the only reality we have" (*Arts*, Feb. 1975, pp. 56-57).

Humphrey's meditation was so intense in the mid-'60s that he framed his monochrome fields in wide borders of contrasting colors—the expanse of "objectified" time and/or experience had to be set apart from the rest of space. In the early '70s, color was contracted into serpentine, raucously pastel forms on oval-shaped canvases. In 1974, Humphrey collaged strips of canvas onto the surface and then painted them over very thickly in a single color, usually a luminous dark blue. These paintings have framed fields, patterns of internal shape and surfaces much more aggressively textured than any he had done before them. All his previous experiments were combined, transformed and intensified in these works. Like his Rothko-esque canvases of the early '60s, these monochrome collage-paintings evoke light as much through paint quality as through

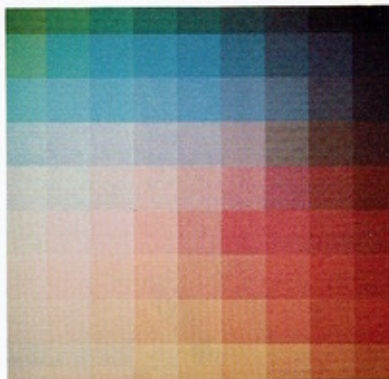
suggestions of windows. This quality continued to set them apart from Minimalism and its aftermath, while an idiosyncratic materiality held his work in real "time, space, and light." His latest paintings take these developments even further. Texture is much heavier, almost shaggy, with glints of lighter blues, reds, yellows and oranges showing through the predominant dark blue. Interior sectionings of the surface sometimes make clear references to windows, especially when one of these extremely thick shaped canvases juts out from the wall like the corner of a building in foreshortened perspective. Yet the light in these paintings is still as immanent, as present in the material, as Humphrey has always made it. There is no illusion of deep space, but there is a reference to it that brings the eye back to the real surface. Humphrey's quietistic agonies have paid off this season in his most fully confident and entirely individual paintings. —Phyllis Diefner

Robert Swain at Susan Caldwell

Robert Swain is a kind of abstract minimalist. His paintings are precisely measured and ordered and rigorously non-rhetorical in their respect for fact, reminding one of seascapes by the 19th-century luminist, Fitz Hugh Lane. Like Lane, Robert Swain transfigures fact into radiant, crystalline light, though his is the fact of pure, non-referential color rather than topology. Swain's light seems not to spring from colored surfaces, but to emanate from some absolute. As in Transcendentalist, spirit suffused in light is made manifest in matter.

The source of this metaphysical effect in Swain's painting is a clear, quantifiable system that structures his color. A grid divides square canvases (invariably either 7 by 7 or 9 by 9 feet) into one-foot squares. Each square is painted a solid color. The darkest color, either black or dark blue, occupies the top right square. The lower left one is always white. Swain's "problem," then, is to choose the colors of the remaining two corners and to establish smooth color runs along all possible vertical, horizontal and diagonal axes, not just from corner to corner but also from edge to edge. Thus, for example, in *Unframed No. 501*, Swain must get from white to black and from green to red along the central diagonal divisions. At the same time, he must coordinate these color runs with all the other chains of colored squares with which they intersect. It's like playing intricate word games with the range of the spectrum as alphabet. The slight irregularities that result from Swain's system add to the surprise and bafflement of his paintings.

Though Swain's color organization is simple, its optical effect is extraordinarily complicated. Each canvas, for example, seems to fold outward into ridges along the grid lines (either horizontally or vertically). Each individual square seems to billow or become concave, and its edges look scalloped. This is due to an illusion of modeling: because of the law of contrasts, the squares look lighter towards their right and upper edges (where they abut darker shades) and vice versa. The contrasts of cooler and warmer colors and of comple-



Top right Robert Swain: *Untitled No. 301*, 1975, 9 feet square; at Susan Caldwell. **Top far right** Ralph Humphrey: *Untitled No. 4*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 60 by 48 by 6 1/4 inches; at John Weber. **Right** Susan Leites: *Red Tulip*, 1975, oil on paper, 14 by 10 inches; at Artists Space. **Far right** Harmony Hammond: *Kyros Born*, 1975, oil and wax on canvas, 24 by 38 inches; at Lamagna.

mentaries further complicate this illusion of value change by adding an illusion of change in hue. Swain also plays with the illusion of transparency, so that any square or group of squares can appear to be transparent and to overlap or underlie any others. Thus, in addition to their initial flat reading, these paintings can also be read as if they open into layer upon layer of chromatic depth like a hall of mirrors.

Pure color sensations ring seemingly infinite changes in pattern. At one instant one might see an arrangement of stacked squares, then a chain of diamonds, then interlocking zig zags and finally a rectilinear spiral. The viewer is always chasing illusions—you can't see two illusions at once. It is our own perceptual participation that gives the works their mystery. And if we allow our eye and mind to be absorbed into the structure and effects of color, our feelings, too, will be caught in the magic of light. —Hayden Herrera

Susan Leites at Artists Space

Susan Leites' paintings are realistic in an allover mode. Her subject is always flowers, though her medium varies—oil on canvas, oil on paper, watercolor on paper, paper cutouts. In *Dahlia*, an oil painting,

the flowers crowd in high-keyed profusion up to the surface and the edges of the canvas. Each blossom covers so much area its complete form tends at first to be elusive. The eye is presented with a spectacle of sheer floweriness in which the spread of petals and the reach of leaves and stems show an energy not to be contained by the decorum of any arrangement. No hint of a vase ever appears, though Leites' version of allover painting remakes the particularly decorous realism of such 19th-century American flower painters as Severin Roesen and his 17th-century Dutch models, De Heem, Heda and so many others.

These earlier flower painters are recalled especially by the crisp, satiny textures Leites builds up from layers of thinned oil paint. She keeps her work in the present with her high-keyed palette and the size of her canvases. *Dahlia* measures a bit over 6 feet high and a bit under 6 feet wide. *Fuchsias* and *Pink Poinsettias* are slightly smaller. For allover paintings, these are medium-sized; for flower paintings, they're immense. Roesen and his stylistic ancestors used oil paint to impart a glistening, occasionally metallic clarity to the form and color of blossoms held to life size or smaller. Suddenly

brought into intense close-up, Leites' flowers give her the chance to treat their quiet jostling at the scale of landscape, while oil paint itself becomes less the medium of an idealized botany than a means to expand the genre's bright and shiny surfaces till they evoke vast passages of light—at the scale of landscape, once more. Yet the identity of particular flowers—individual members of recognizable species—is never lost. Nor does an appropriate scale slip away. One never has the sense of looking at unnaturally large objects floating in chasms. Suggestions of landscapes are paradoxically compatible with images of very small inhabitants of landscape—flowers—thanks to the way Leites has freed the actual size of her painted forms from the size of their referents.

Among the smaller works in the show, the paper cutouts have a special interest because their overlapping elements are miniatures of the large oil paintings' main imagery. Allover painting is traditionally abstract. Leites arrived at realism in an allover mode by working in part from these flower silhouettes, which themselves join abstraction and representation. Her crucial decision was to bring her im-