PHOENIX LETTER

Merrill Mahaffey's show of landscape paintings at the Elaine Horwitch Gallery was fortuitously presented while the Phoenix Art Museum displayed "Thomas Moran: Works from the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art." The exhibition included 70 oil paintings, watercolors and drawings selected from over 1,000 works by Moran. In this presentation, Moran seemed a man who in spite of his privileged historical placement was an artist of rather limited technical, intellectual and aesthetic means.

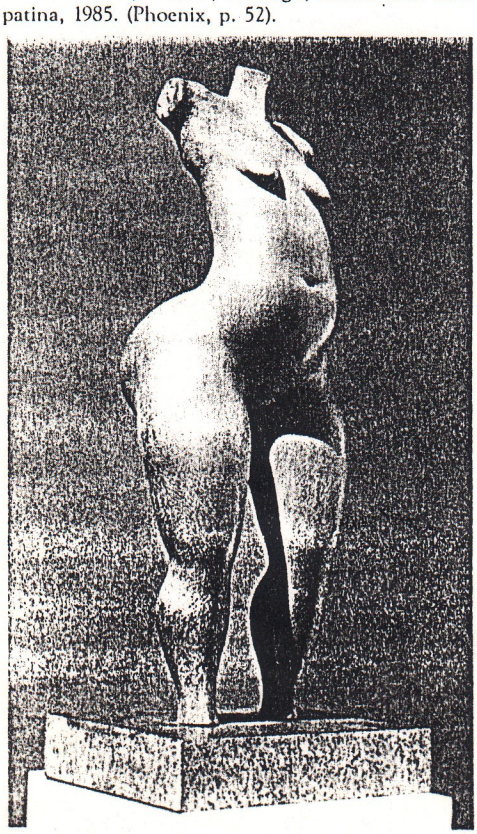
Mahaffey often succeeds where Moran fails in attempting to portray a "sublime" nature, particularly in works such as the enormous *Twilight Peak* which is a panoramic view of snow-covered mountaintops enveloped in mist. While Mahaffey's failures may be more obvious and numerous than those of Thomas Moran, it is apparent that within the narrow confines of documentary art Merrill Mahaffey is the more innovative and consistently excellent of the two.

Nick de Matties' paintings at the Collier Gallery reflected this artist's conscious attempt to create a Post-modern idiolect wherein we see box-like humanoids that resemble early-20th-century representations of robots, visual references to Pop Art, and a reliance on the Cubist grid for a unifying pictorial structure.

Beth Ames Swartz's "Trans-Illumination Series" exhibition at the Elaine Horwitch Gallery presented large acrylic paintings, each with its individual watercolor study. At their best these paintings resemble idiosyncratic Post-modern abstractions which disconcertingly vary stylistically from each other. But, in her attempt to invent brand-new formal equivalents for her emotional responses to each sitter, Swartz sought to create her own Post-modern alphabet.

"American Art of the 1980s" at the Phoenix Art Museum was composed of selections from the Eli and Edyth L. Broad collection including works by Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf, David Salle, Jonathan Borofsky, Julian Schnabel, Jedd Garet, and other "trendy" artists. While Post-modernism may never be any more stylistically consistent than was Pop Art, Bruce D. Kurtz's catalog statement that the exhibition documents four "major tendencies" in the art of this decade was unconvincing.

Donald Locke, *Pomona*, 26" high, bronze with blue patina, 1985. (Phoenix, p. 52).



Works by Peter Shire at The Hand and The Spirit Gallery included a large body of sculptural works including abstract, free-standing compositions, mixed-media paintings, tables, a lamp, teapots, and cloisonne pins and earrings. One of Shire's most appealing tables is *Baby Hollywood*, a modestly scaled end table in an "L" shape with a pink formica top.

The Yares Gallery staged still another museum-quality exhibition, this time of the works by the late Yves Klein who died in 1962 at the age of 34 when he was already regarded as one of the most important artists of his generation. Klein's art was inspired by the Rosicrucianism of Max Heindel whose cosmology rephrases Eastern philosophy and emphasizes the color blue as a symbol of infinite Space/Spirit. Still, the French artist's work is less appreciated for its spiritual content than for its relation to the international Conceptual Art movement which gained wide acceptance after his death.

"Artists Select: Contemporary Perspectives by Afro-American Artists," from mid-February to mid-March at the University Art Collections, Arizona State University, seemed to point out by inference that Afro-American art is simply a branch of American art and might well have served as a survey of the tendencies within that broad category. Though several pieces dealt with specifically black subjects, there was nothing which could be spotted as done in a specifically black style. Donald Locke's *Venus Torso*, 1984, provided a beautiful form, not handled in a classic Greek or Renaissance way, but in a style idealized but real. In contrast, Francis Sprout's *Randomly Placed Amorphic Forms/Stereotypes Reconsidered*, 1986, was a large installation featuring stuffed figures reminiscent of the Wizard of Oz and a minstrel show as a sad, indignant protest that, in the artist's words, "in 1986 Blacks continued to be addressed stereotypically." Yet without this verbal prompting the figures came off more fun-and-games than effective vehicles for anger. John Biggers, however, handled that fine shade of difference which marks the boundary between type and caricature. In *Shot Guns* there was a light, draftsmanly precision in the way Biggers presented black women standing like Egyptian funerary monuments in the doors of their "shotgun" houses. In his lithograph, *The Upper Room*, two laundresses ascended a hill, balancing their burdens on their heads. Overtones of the strength of black religious experience came through: the seemingly ordinary was transformed.

Spiritual in a different sense, Vernell DeSilva's two paintings offered African-derived imagery of the *Amenta*, male and female spirits which transmigrate. Carl Hazelwood's abstract painting, *Demerara: Region of Gold #11*, 1983, dominated the show. Presented simply as the artist's acknowledgment of his native Guyana landscape, the big canvas glowed and shimmered and compelled, gaining and deepening as one stood before it. Eugene Grigsby's lithographs were lyrical and almost evanescent. Some small pieces constructed of coiled wire and sardine cans by Frank Parker were precious like treasures and witty in an understated way. Quiet, consistent, mixed-media paintings by Rip Woods played the materials against lines of direction on the painting surface. An installation by John Outterbridge, *California Crosswalk, Ethnic Heritage Group*, 1982, offered a big, shiny, showy machine creature in a shiny dreamscape racing car.

Simultaneously, the Udinotti Gallery mounted an exhibition of sculptures by Donald Locke. Outstanding in their celebration of the nude were his female torsos. With their protruding abdomens and cantilevered buttocks, they were markedly non-European and markedly beautiful. The largest, *Venus of Tuba City*, massive in feeling though only some 2½ feet tall, recalls the *Venus of Willendorf*, that bulbous, hand-sized figure from the Stone Age, much rubbed and worn, faceless, all belly and breasts. Locke's Venus is far more finely made, and, though fat by Western standards, carries herself with her own dignity and grace. This dignity is interwoven with, is a measure of, her fecundity. It is that fecundity which was the hallmark of the show.

A formal principle which has characterized all of Locke's work, regardless of theme, is a highly energetic jarring of the axis, working just enough against symmetry to give the composition force. First impressions to the contrary, Locke is not Brancusi reconstituted. While Brancusi worked for a graceful, all-sufficient balance, Locke sets the scales very subtly off, and in that dissonance the work comes alive. At the same time, in all the pieces in the show the patinas were striking. When they were achieved through a solution of cupric nitrate they resulted in greenish tones and, with the addition of cobalt, blue-greens. The patina finishes were dull and faintly crackled. In some of the pieces, as in one of the "Winged Forms," this was used as contrast to shiny, naked bronze where the edge of one "wing" alone was polished. It was used as well to highlight the implanted, rod-like shape which was the seed in *Fruit with Seed*, set in the midst of a nest-like, enclosing shape. The title was appropriate, for a strong feeling of warmth, of birth and beginnings, of the fertilized yolk imbued these pieces.

The most African torso, *Pomona*, with exaggerated belly and bum and tiny, used, pendulous breasts, was as sheer an image of fertility as any which can be imagined. This figure still invoked the desire to touch the cradle, for about its navel was a distinctly smooth crescent of surface where many hands had brushed. —**Joseph E. Young and Barbara Cortright**