

Art News
1977

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Catching up with Morris Louis

The 1976-77 season in Washington opened with a Morris Louis retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery of Art (through January 9). It was, in a way, a fitting and long overdue tribute to the painter who worked here in isolation throughout the 1950s and up to his death by lung cancer in 1962. This was the first solo show ever granted Louis by a Washington museum.

The exhibition, a selection of 16 paintings covering the principal phases of Louis' tragically abbreviated mature career, is by no means a major retrospective to match those held in several large museums around the world during the intervening years. It is in a sense a bit of catching up by the National Gallery, which was conceived as an exhibition hall for old master paintings and which waited until very nearly the eighth decade of the 20th century to acknowledge the existence of any first-class modern painting other than Picasso's.

The show is, however, something more than just that. The choice of Louis as the first painter born in this century to be given

one-man show in the National Gallery's main exhibition galleries was not haphazard and not the result of local chauvinism. It represents a considered judgment on the part of E. A. Carmean, the National's contemporary curator, about the history of modern painting, a judgment in the familiar formalist esthetic as refined by Clement Greenberg. Louis' art, as Carmean says, was "essentially about color," and because of this his painting is situated in the inner circle, perhaps in the center of this particular pantheon. As the opening date for the National Gallery's new East Wing building approaches (now scheduled for fall 1978), this judgment has some fairly clear, potentially disturbing implications for the 20th-century collecting policies of the museum: formalist criteria, stringently applied, tend to be presumptuously narrow. It is perhaps grounds for encouragement to note that next year's installment in the National's 20th-century series will focus close-up on a few key themes in the work of Joseph Cornell, a fascinating odd-man-out in formalist or other schematic histories of modern art.

Paradoxically, when viewed in the context of Washington, the Louis show has the effect not of celebrating the achievements of the Washington Color School, but of calling attention to the long-festering factional disputations, the claims and counterclaims about quality and who did what first, among early members of this school. By focusing solely on Louis, Carmean implies that the other achievements were after—or what's worse, lesser than—those of his main man. In this he's being true to history in one sense, for Louis and Kenneth Noland indeed gained the lion's share of critical, curatorial and commercial attention in the decade and a half since the "magic moment" of the color school occurred in Washington. The reputations and careers of several excellent painters—Howard Mehring and Thomas Downing being the more obvious examples—have been adversely affected by this fixation on Louis and Noland. The whole business of the color school desperately needs sorting out. Yet another Louis show has again retarded the process.

The show is very beautiful. Louis' paintings are beautiful and Carmean is a practiced judge of them. Louis tended to work a single motif in serial variations during the foreshortened period of his mastery. Carmean follows the chronology of these series with excellent examples from the veil paintings, the "florals," the "unfurleds," and the stripes. He introduces along the way a minor and very pretty surprise in the form of a "column" painting, a lucid vertical green shaft separating two equal areas of white unprimed canvas. Carmean also presents convincing evidence that Louis intended that a painting called *Equator* (diagonal

stripes, upper left corner to lower right) be hung à la Mondrian as a diamond, thus making the stripes horizontal and enhancing the picture's command of space. However, the painting is hung as a square in accordance with convention and the wishes of the collector who loaned it for the show.

The National's show ratifies received interpretations of Louis' art in several ways. It is hung in close proximity to Helen Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* (on loan from the artist), which implies that the story of Louis' and Noland's 1953 conversion to the presence of this painting is the whole truth. Actually, Carmean knows that Louis' sources are much more complex, as he demonstrates in the catalogue. Carmean also starts the show with *Salient*, a yet painting done in the intense period of experimentation during 1954. *Salient*, as Carmean notes, is more accomplished than others among these early stain works, and he asserts that here "we are in the presence of Louis' mature paintings." Nonetheless, Louis went through his well-known retreat to other procedures during the following three years. *Salient*, hung in the same room with two majestic veils done later, after he had resumed pouring and staining thin layers of color into the canvas, looks hesitant and tentative by comparison. This suggests to me that Louis reached self-confident maturity in 1958, not 1954. Emphasizing the earlier date is useful to establish Louis' credentials as a technical and stylistic innovator, but it makes too much of the fact. Again, our entire view of the stylistic and expressive achievements of other painters working in Washington at the time has suffered as a result.

These are the kind of arguments one can always get into with formalist history and criticism, with its built-in overemphasis on technical innovation and the solution of purely pictorial problems. Formalism as a way of viewing art has an alarming tendency to leave out just what is most absorbing in the art. So, too, with Louis, the hero of color and literal flatness. I have a feeling that Louis' paintings are substantial enough to outlast interpretive squabbles. If so, then to say that Louis' art is "essentially about color" will come to seem a non sequitur, describing the obvious but telling you next to nothing that you really want to know.

The Corcoran Gallery of Art opened this season on a semi-adventurous note with "Five Plus One," an exhibition consisting of chief curator Jane Livingston's ideas of the better among lesser-known talents in Washington. Livingston and the Corcoran pluckily went all-out for the six artists, producing a handsome 100-page catalogue for the "Five" and a calendar-catalogue for Claudia de Monte who, because her art involves direct viewer participation more than

it does objectmaking, gets separate treatment as the "Plus One."

There is something strained about most new-talent shows. Often, as here, the shows are scheduled before the talent is discovered. This adds a show-must-go-on anxiety to the usual risk of rolling dice with the future, which can prove the curators to have been misguided. Livingston's roll of the dice produced a show-biz dud but an interesting, intense and, as always, uneven exhibition.

The only other generalization to make is that there is an aura of extreme privacy about the show—at times one feels like an uninvited guest viewing the residue of some compulsive private ritual. The degree to which this private activity produces extraordinary art is, as always, a moot point. It happens here, perhaps, in the case of Alex Castro, whose large, heavy graphite drawings of minimal-looking circular forms on paper are displayed upon the floor, where they were rubbed on hands and knees. Castro's paperworks successfully embody opposite physical properties—weighty lead on light-weight surface, light reflection surrounded by light absorption, the initial machine-perfect appearance contrasting with the final hand-scribed feel—and in the end they seem both personal and traditional-oriental rather than impersonal and industrial-occidental. Whether the two works shown are enough to build an art upon remains to be seen.

Castro shares a reductive vocabulary and introversion with Daniel Brush and Jane M. Dow. Brush labors with large unprimed, sized canvases, drawing thousands of monochromatic parallel horizontal lines from left to right—the left edge flush, the right edge uneven, its extent apparently determined less by formal considerations than by some interior rhythm of the artist's. Oddly, in view of Brush's obvious precedents (the color school is there, Irwin, Still, others), his paintings are not very pretty. Their low-key sensual appeal is counterbalanced by an almost frightening underlying intensity, a sort of high-pitched nervousness. This facet of his art is even more apparent after one reads in Livingston's fascinating catalogue interview of his monk-like working habits. There is a severely reductive, monastic quality to the work and working habits of Dow, too, only here the precedents are different, running more to the Mondrian orbit. Her work is exploratory and uneven, but convinces you that she is promising in a most serious way.

After such honed-down, almost hard-to-find, internalized art, the huge color-filled canvases of David Headley come as a bright relief. Headley is a very persuasive colorist and he picks his way knowledgeably through wide-ranging sources (Still, New-

man, Vasarely and Louis come immediately to mind) but it is the energy and intensity of his search for synthesis and not the achievement of it that impresses. The light-filled paintings of Ann Purcell, alone among these artists in pursuing a complex, painterly style, are a delightful sensual explosion in this context. Again, she is uneven, but filled with talent, and her ebullient attack charms even as it fails to convince that she is fully in command of her own authoritative vision.

De Monte's art involves direct viewer participation in an unusual, novelistic way, de Monte herself being the protagonist and the viewer being at once spectator and minor character in the unfinished plot. Her principal piece involves trading—viewers are invited to trade something from their lives for some artifact from hers, thus setting up an unpredictable and potentially limitless sequence of social interchanges. The fact that the story itself is real, and that some defining though undramatic interference is called for on the part of the viewer, accounts in large measure for the sometimes grating, sometimes poignant effectiveness of this piece. The other parts of her exhibit, (which is disastrously installed inside an enormous Corcoran space where intimacy is called for), including a sequence of boring photographs of the artist (a tall, beautiful woman) attracting attention on city streets and a potpourri of tawdry mail-order items inscribed "Claudia," add something to the whole but have small presence in themselves.

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