

## New York

FRANCIS BACON, Marlborough Gallery; "An Australian Accent," P.S. 1; PINA BAUSCH, "1980," Brooklyn Academy of Music:

## FRANCIS BACON

Francis Bacon's new paintings demonstrate again his secure mastery of a by-now-familiar vocabulary, and yet, with the artist aged 75, still strike new notes. Bacon's position seems toweringly high at this moment. Through the ages of abstraction and minimalism he remained one of the very few representational painters about whom even dedicated formalists could feel good. Now the forefront of things has caught up with him, in both his quoting—of Cimabue, Van Gogh, Velázquez, Ingres, and of photographic images—and his kind of exploration of space. The opposition between the illusionistic, three-dimensional space of representation and the flat, concrete space of minimalist abstraction offers a conceptual dilemma which Bacon was among the first to bring into the open, exploring, as he put it, "the difference, in fact, between paint which conveys directly and paint which conveys through illustration." Since about 1950 his canvases have involved limited areas of illusionistic depth surrounded and separated by areas of flat paint suggestive of fabric. Certain areas remain highly ambiguous as to which view of space they more openly express. Recent work called post-Modern has been prominently occupied with this question, juxtaposing and interpenetrating the two kinds of space in ways that often question the reality of either.

In Bacon's new work his familiar vocabulary of depth definition is used. Hints of perspective poke through orange grounds (a feature of his earliest paintings) and create momentary theaters for the drama of the representation. Furniture also performs the space-thickening function of wresting an illusionistic platform from the engulfing trend of the ground. As in the "Pope" paintings of 1951, areas of three-dimensionality are sometimes marked off by surrounding perspectival boxes or booths.

Most of the new works show naked male humans whose anatomy streaks off into speed blurs and melts into drippings on the floor. Seen through the distorting veils of time, the figures are head-

less, often have legs and feet where arms and hands are expected, and, in their four-legged-monster aspect, seem homoerotic icons of a buttocks-centered humanity. These figures act out what Bacon has called "the shortness of the moment of existence between birth and death," undergoing before our eyes an impersonal drama of absorption into the void/ground. Cadaverous as if on operating tables, partial as if on meat racks, they briefly and weakly state the message of their existence and their desire. Space itself, the property of being embodied, erodes them instantly, flattening the illusionistic self into mute objecthood. Here Bacon turns the contradiction between the two painterly models of space into pure content, crucifying his figures upon it. Though elegantly sweetened by pastel amid the acrylic, these works still exert something of the "exhilarated despair," as Bacon called it, of the earlier works. Two paintings of less familiar type take Bacon's sense of spatiality and expand it, first into an outdoor urban scene in *Statue and Figures in a Street*, 1983, then into cosmography in *A Piece of Waste Land*, 1982. These pieces hint at new wonders that may flow from Bacon's confrontation with the facts of body, space, and the world.

## "An Australian Accent"

This show of works by three Australian painters not seen in this country before was right on the issues of the moment; it made one wonder how much intelligent and mature international painting goes relatively unseen here. The post-Modern concern with mediating surface and depth—terms that can be applied to both painted space and the sense of self—is a basic and well-understood ingredient of much of this art. Mike Parr's large horizontal works on paper address the dilemma directly. Each features on its left side a representational charcoal self-portrait of the artist in a reifying context of deep space; this context is strangely torqued and tested, however, and is balanced on the right by an expressionistically scribbled mottling of the surface which compromises deep space, sometimes to an extreme of flatness. Parr, formerly a performance artist, incorporates performance elements into the works, giving them interesting temporal axes and conceptual layerings. Sometimes, they are also handsome or ingratiating esthetic presences.

Like Parr's, Imants Tillers' large paintings incorporate both conceptual and

performance elements. Each is a vast jigsaw composed of many small canvas boards, all identical in size and shape, and all painted with a fragment of the total image system. These small canvases may be stacked on the floor, in a minimal/conceptual type of installation, or arrayed on the walls as representational paintings. But when they are composed on the walls it is found that the jigsaw is compromised; contiguous edges do not necessarily read contiguously, and so on.

Most interesting is how Tillers deals with the interface between the deep and shallow models of space. In some works, grids asserting the primacy of the ground are jostled by brush-drawn figures which bring no environment of deep space with them. In others the ground is worked and reworked in a variety of ways till it becomes a kind of woolly deep surface. In this entangling stuff, images from different contexts and of different scales flow over one another, as in filmic superimposition. The images are all quoted, found ones, and their relationships point to a semiotic infinite regress, as, for example, areas that function as ground in one reading function in another as figure. Sometimes figurative incidents relate in joking ways to the ambiguous density of the surface that surges around them; small landscape vistas open up here and there, within which tiny dramas arise. One studies the most successful works, like *Pataphysical Man*, 1984, as intently from two feet as from twenty, finding quite different paintings and experiences.

Ken Unsworth's paintings are concerned less with the question of space and self than with the post-Modern substitution of dramatic for formal values. Though works on paper, they are so heavily built up with bitumen- and aluminum-based paints as to appear heavy. Unsworth's cartoonlike images are appropriated partly from the domain of the horror novel and the horror comic, partly from his own earlier performance pieces. Birds start trouble everywhere, as in Alfred Hitchcock's films, while humans are attacked, tortured, and terrified in a variety of ways. The images are hauntingly dramatic.

In all these works we are dealing with post-Modern, conceptual painting. Tillers' images are all appropriated. Unsworth and Parr, both formerly body artists, try to mediate performance and painting by incorporating elements of their performances into their pictures;

both, for example, sometimes derive their images from photographs of their own performances. Many other artists who ten years ago felt that by doing performance they were working "closer to life" are also now juggling images in this way. But the question of what is closer to life has become more difficult, insofar as images and their permutations are of and for the mind, they embody life as consciousness. Yet paintings derived from performances often seem less compelling than photodocumentation of the performances, let alone the performances themselves. In any case, this strategy is emerging as another major subgenre of conceptual painting.

## PINA BAUSCH

While Pina Bausch's work is consistently surprising, it is not altogether unpredictable. The four works seen here in their New York premieres—*The Rite of Spring*, 1975, *Café Müller*, 1978, *Bluebeard*, 1977, and *1980*, 1980—all deal with the ancient motif of "Death and the maiden," or the Persephone myth. In addition, all exhibit a Wagnerian leisure in making their points, and making them again and again, till all meaning the artist has access to has been wrung out of them; meanwhile, the intensity of concentration rises in an almost demonic arc. Still, in other ways the four works are entirely different. I am here describing *1980*, a work that revives the Dada performance vocabulary and brings it to life with astonishing vigor.

Except for a low platform, the stage is stripped bare back to the rear wall of the theater and covered with sod and grass. The light is dim. A youth enters, sits on the platform, and begins slowly, catalogically eating. Couples enter as a Beethoven adagio is heard. Slow, droopy ballroom dancing begins. The dancers parade through the audience and back. One woman is separated from the others, who say goodbye to her, though all remain on stage. The magician Death enters to show his trick of making threads longer or cutting them short, as the Fates do in Greek mythology. A woman undresses a man and gives him a hotfoot. A woman kisses a man till his face is red with lipstick. Two or three things are going on at once now, and then suddenly it's ten: people are eating, dressing, undressing, exchanging clothes, cutting things on plates, moving in every direction. A nearly naked girl is hiding demurely behind this person or that. Mae West is imitated. The stage