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# ARTFORUM



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## A new series of plexiglass constructions mount organic forms in a complex space



Craig Kauffman behind unpainted molded plexiglass sheet.



Craig Kauffman, "Tell Tale Heart," 1958.

### CLAIR WOLFE

It is not surprising that a tradition of experimentation with new materials, which has been a concern of modern artists since the early decades of the century, should be revitalized in southern California. Of all the traditions of modern art, this one, certainly, has a natural locus in an area in which aircraft, plastics, chemical and film industries feed an almost inexhaustible variety of new materials into the studios of artists. The materials which simply suggested a set of exotic possibilities to Moholy-Nagy, Duchamp, Picasso and the Bauhaus innovators become, in the southern California environment, as logical a medium for the creation of art as oil paint or marble had been in the past. The use of industrial techniques and the employment of industrial materials, has led several Los Angeles artists, like Craig Kauffman, to a re-affirmation of at least two tenets of Bauhaus esthetics. First, an overall agreement with the Bauhaus principle of a re-orientation of art from Renaissance traditions to an art more in tune with an industrial, technological society of mass production and mass media. Second, in line with this, a tacit acceptance of the proposition that art no longer attains to the creation of a single masterpiece, but instead toward the creation of "the commonly usable type," a development, in other words, towards "Standards."

Until roughly the end of 1959 Craig Kauffman was painting under the influence of action techniques. Yet, even in those days there were striking differences. For example, the persistent occurrence on the canvas of a single image, organic and sensuous, and a cerebral quality which no amount of gesture and spontaneity could convert to the emotional romanticism so characteristic of the movement as a whole. Having, as it were, discovered the native

meaning, line and shape of his art in action painting, Kauffman felt himself led to a more cerebral working out of what had once been the forms of "chance" into a structured, formal, concrete manifestation of his intuition. The works cannot be construed as either paintings or sculptures; they are both, and neither. They are simply concrete, and very specific, objects.

It is not difficult to appreciate the necessity of discovering a more exact medium than oil if the artist is striving for the specific. Oil, as invaluable as it is to the virtuoso illusionist, as malleable, or as luxurious as pure paint, was simply inadequate. But from it, Kauffman learned exactly what kind of line he wanted. It occurred to him that such a line could best be created by constructing it **independently** from the rest of the painting. He masked it off, and painted it on the back of a plexiglass sheet with a specially invented pigment that bonds itself permanently to the ground. The result was one of amazing clarity.

Because of his interest in pure visual effects, because of the magnitude of possibilities opened up by the new materials, Kauffman abandoned gestural techniques entirely. And with that abandonment, also abandoned expressionism. The artist absorbed his newly-found freedom so thoroughly that "meaning" itself was inherent in the materials. The idea of trying to "say something" became absurd. The object created would, without self-consciousness, actually **be** something. An ideal of action painting was thus realized for Kauffman, independent of its techniques—the total absorption of form by materials.

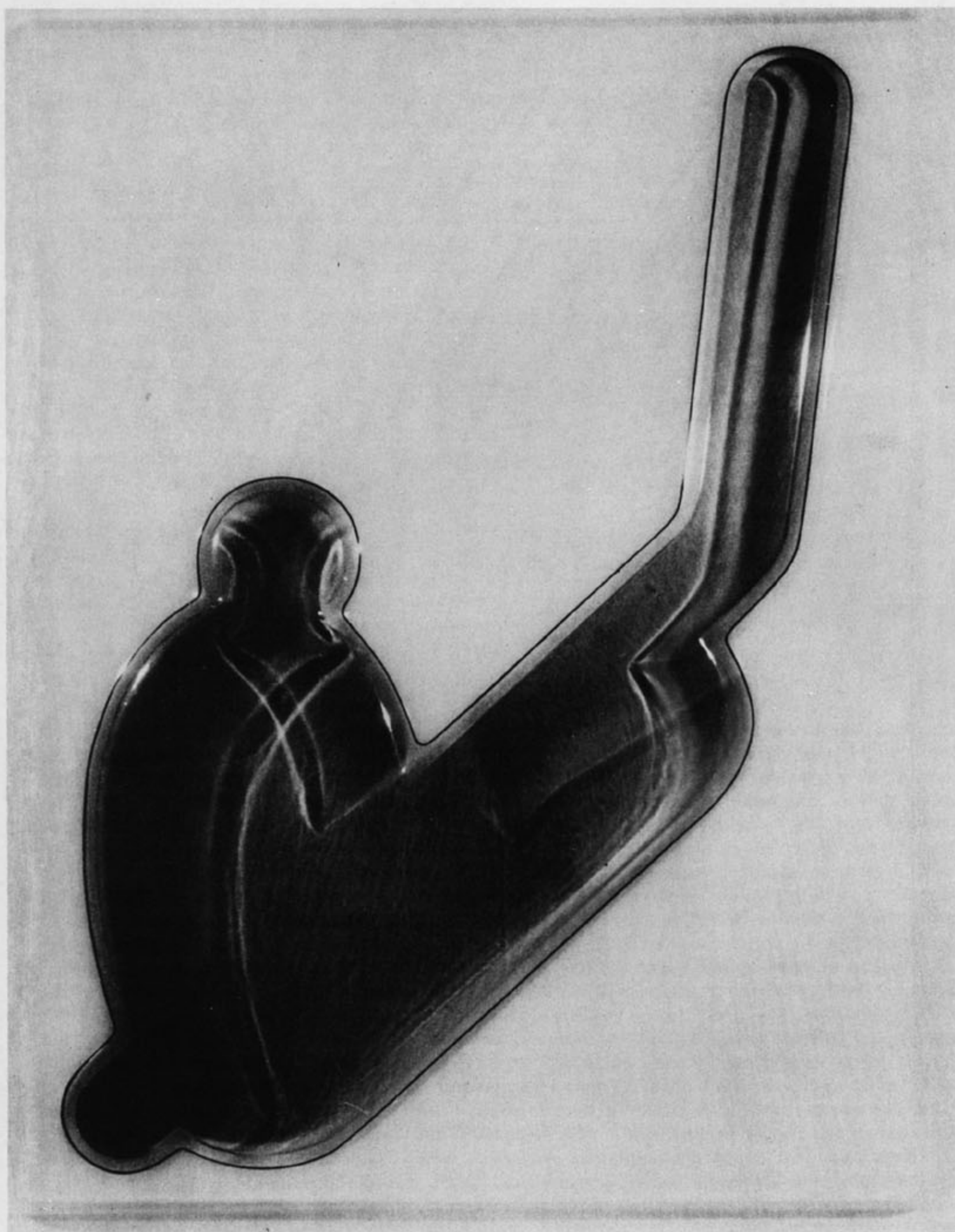
Kauffman's art is planted in a firm field of purely visual relationships; his disciplined technique and integrated materials work over a series of forms which are organic, and even sexual. Certainly much

that is compelling in his work derives from the tension arising between materials which are clean, objective and orderly and a series of images which, seemingly, "should be" messy, sloppy, and imperfect. They are a remarkable extension of the logic of his earlier oils. The differences between his earlier works and his later ones is purely in his extension of material potentials.

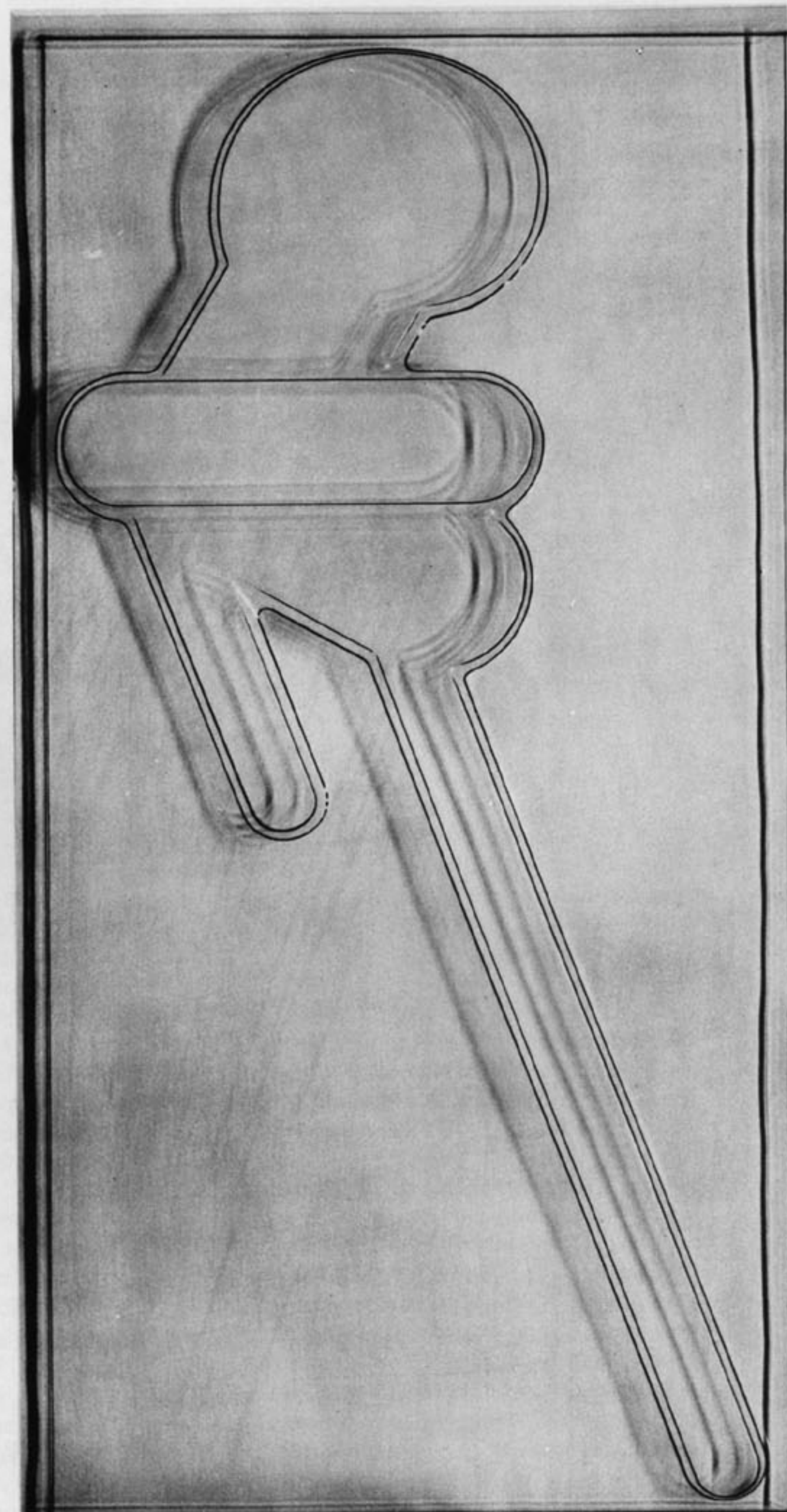
The works shown in his last exhibition (1964) have achieved definition and clarity at the sacrifice of painterly textures and the chaos of spontaneity. The 1958 paintings suggest three-dimensionality in the constant tension between forward-thrusting and backward-moving color. The 1964 series, on flat plexiglass, do exactly the same thing without depending upon illusionism. The three-dimensional space is actually there, in reality. The composed forms, painted upon the plexiglass so that a play of shadow is thrown against the white backdrop, emphasize the literal three-dimensionality. There is a constantly changing relationship of forms that remains naturally integrated. This provides a time/space/motion environment.

In his last series Kauffman extends the idea even further by vacuum-molding the organic image itself, creating a three-dimensional image in a three-dimensional space.

Besides the double tensions of the molded forms against their white backdrop, Kauffman has added an additional interplay of light-in-motion by using transparent instead of opaque colors. The two colors, one of the molded form, the other on its plexiglass backdrop actually mix their light to create a third color in the space between the two planes. Depending upon external lighting and the position of the viewer, the painting takes on a life-motion that actually exists. It does not merely suggest movement, but is movement. Literally, the works move with the rhythms of the viewer himself. Rather than oppose naturalism, the works establish such an intimate relationship that they are accurately conceived as an extension of the spectator's own perceptive life. A piece functions in tune with the viewer; but more importantly, even hints at the magnitude of "super-real" experience lying at the fringe of the viewer's inhibiting consciousness. In other words, the viewer has an intimate and automatic relationship with the art object that he cannot avoid, for his own sensory equipment, in the mixing of the translucent colors and the ever-changing space are as much a part of the work as the plastic, the paint, the shape or the scale. They are to be seen intuitively. ■



Craig Kauffman, untitled. Vacuum molded painted plexiglass.



Craig Kauffman, untitled, 80x42", 1965.