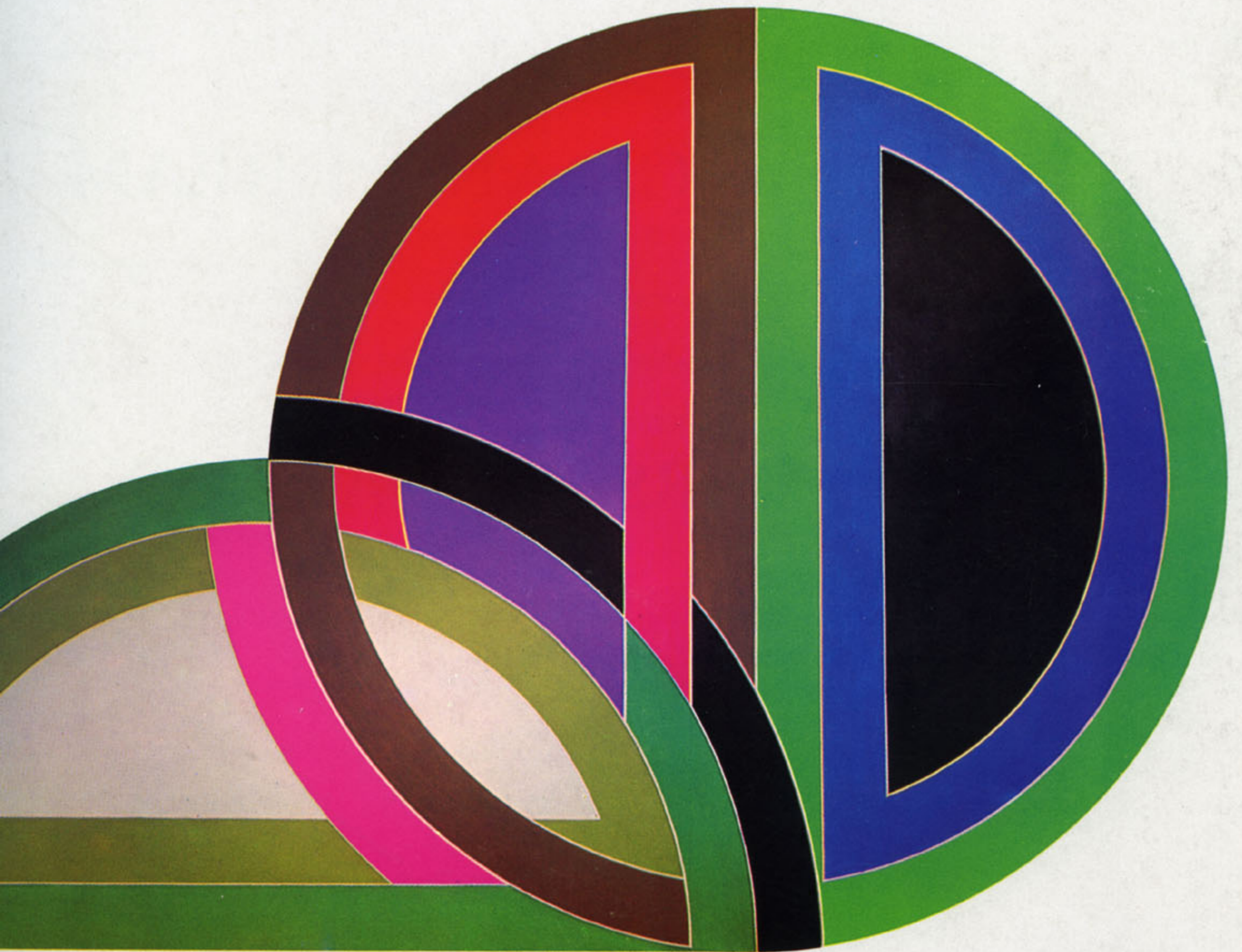


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COVER: Frank Stella, *Darabjerd I*, fluorescent acrylic (water soluble), 10x15', 1967. (Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery.)

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LOS ANGELES

AGNES MARTIN, Nicholas Wilder Gallery; GROUP, Irving Blum Gallery; ELIZABETH ALLEN, Fleischer/Anhalt Gallery; AMALIA SCHULTHESS, Esther-Robles Gallery; MEL RAMOS, David Stuart Gallery.

AGNES MARTIN's six recent paintings at Nicholas Wilder are all 72 x 72". It is not easy to discern a hierarchy of importance among them on any grounds but the most purely subjective ones. Each functions precisely, in its own terms, exactly as one feels it must. The very existence of paintings by Martin in a public place implies that they are already selections from, or completions of, an unknown number of experimental works leading to their final states. Not only does she in fact destroy many works, but the works present have an almost incredible air in themselves of being culminations. Confronted with these canvases, one simply does not argue intent, or resolution, or lack of it.

There are several reasons why these paintings resist purposive speculation. First, they are so refined and so infinitely subtle — every pencilled line, every interval of white or nuance of grey is so carefully controlled — that it is difficult to weigh the effects of parts on the whole with any clarity. There is no question of presuming to reenact the structuring process vicariously, much less to improve upon it. But this is not because they are elaborate or complex. Martin uses line in repeated symmetrical patterns. She restricts herself radically in every formal direction, which enables her in a particular sense to transcend problems of tension, if tension in painting means weighted interrelations of heterogeneous figurations on a picture surface. This is especially true of the paintings which are striated horizontally in schematic patterns based upon alternating single, double or four-line combinations. Moreover, there is vir-

tually no adequate precedent or comparison by which one can measure these works. They are simultaneously conventional and unpretentious technically (Martin draws with graphite pencil on painted canvas), and yet so original and self-involved that they undermine the relevance of historical or stylistic analogy. It is difficult to imagine any art which would be freer of conceit or exposition.

In all their asceticism, Martin's paintings are loaded with syntactical, textural and chromatic phenomena. For instance, in *Summer Sky* (a horizontal stripe painting organized in groups of four evenly spaced lines, divided by a single line spaced more widely) a few drops of black paint are mixed into the white. As a result, the entire surface is shot through with vague shadows visible only from some distance, and even then the greys are so muted that one sees them only fleetingly. Nevertheless the field is profoundly enriched. In *The Garden*, the lines are placed at relatively narrow intervals, about three-quarters and one-eighth inch apart. The white paint is applied in even horizontal strokes, quite thickly, so that the texture of the canvas beneath is nearly disguised. By contrast, the brush strokes in *Happy Valley* are irregular and the fabric weave comes through more strongly. Though this is evident only on close scrutiny, it is extremely important for the total effect of the work. This painting is slightly shiny, and the paint appears to be applied more thickly. This was achieved partly by applying a transparent wash over the whole surface, including the pencilled lines. But again it is a matter of minute degree; all the works are covered with a transparent wash, but only here is it heavy enough to be obvious.

Martin draws with a draftsman's pencil and simple measuring tools, a T-square or yardstick. The quality of the line is soft and barely irregular. The lines vary in thickness and value, and in some places one sees the overlapping of two pencilled strokes. However, the delineation in these works is broader generally and less hesitant than in her earliest grey and white line paintings such as *Leaf in the Wind* of 1963.

If there is one work among these which is less successful than the rest, it is *The Cliff*. Here the canvas is divided into a rectangular grid, in

the manner of Martin's previous style. Each rectangular section is filled with densely spaced vertical lines. From an oblique angle, the work is seen as a softly modulated all-over grey surface.

From the days when Irving Blum's hand figured importantly in the exhibitions at the old Ferus Gallery (briefly, before its demise, the Ferus/Pace Gallery), the presentations there were characterized by a consistent economy of works, legible installation and rigorous standards of quality. Accordingly, the opening of the new Irving Blum Gallery has been awaited with high expectation, and in fact almost everything about the present exhibition justifies this optimism. The choice of artists — Stella, Flavin, Judd, Irwin and Kauffman — is unexceptionable; the decision to show only one work by each artist (lately unusual at best for most L.A. galleries) is no less creditable for having precedent. Perhaps best of all is the fact that no effort is made to offer any thematic, stylistic, geographic, chronological, formal or ideological reason why works by these particular artists should be shown together. They reflect purely and simply a desire to present five individually valuable pieces of art.

Stella is represented by a 1967 painting, *Cinema de Pepsi I*. It is divided into two adjacent squares, one of which is a black, white and grey concentric striped pattern, the other an almost identical configuration in fluorescent orange, red, yellow, blue, purple and green acrylic paint. Both square patterns are disrupted from closed symmetry by the introduction of a complex twist, with short diagonal edges forming triangles in the center: thus the line is activated, suggesting the possibility of entrance into the linear episode; it is as though the line spends itself in the center, but leaves open a potential for further resolution.

Dan Flavin is shown in a work from 1964, an eight-foot yellow neon tube placed against the wall diagonally. Judd's 1967 modular piece comprises seven rectangular units mounted against the wall to form an overall columnar figuration. Each unit is made of stainless steel on the three outward-facing sides, with dark green plexiglass fitted into the metal frames forming the top and bottom faces. The entire piece is seven feet from

top to bottom; each unit is six inches high, spaced at six-inch intervals. This work raises a number of questions about Judd's polemical and practical esthetic stands over the last two or three years. Although his use of colored plastic here renders the material sense of the work much more utilitarian in spirit than decorative (one regards it similarly to how one might regard a polarized green windshield rather than, say, a deeply tinted shop window), still, a degree and kind of ambiguity creeps in which defeats one's ability to simply encounter, rather than take measure of, the combined objects. One keeps discovering new angles: the first view is of shiny steel modules; nearer, the horizontal plastic panels come into view; nearer yet, they refract white light in the middle (eye level) and diffuse green light at top and bottom. Thus the discrete repeated entities play on one another in a special manner which goes far beyond a rudimentary gestalt.

Alone on one wall is a work from Craig Kauffman's earlier 1967 vacuum-formed plexiglass series. It is green, rectangular with rounded corners, with a smaller rectangular protuberance in the center. An obvious dichotomy exists between Kauffman's conspicuous exploitation of the blatantly opulent quality of colored plastic (though this in itself is far from being his sole objective) and Judd's specifically pragmatic and restrained handling of the same material.

The choice of a dark pink painting from Robert Irwin's *Ocean Park Series* of 1962-63 is oddly disappointing, not because it is an inferior canvas but because one is impatient to see new work by Irwin exhibited publicly in Los Angeles. One does not object to the re-exposure of familiar work just because it is familiar. Nevertheless the painting at hand is less interesting than the other four pieces.

When one gets right down to it, the old Bauhaus notion that the artist is obligated to respect the "integrity of the material," whether it be wood, paper, steel or stone, not only isn't an inviolable dictum but means very little until it is violated. This, at any rate, is the most diverting reflection occasioned from AMALIA SCHULTHESS's current exhibition of sculpture at Esther-Robles. We have

seen Schulthess's progress over the years in a fairly even, if diverse, formal direction. Because she clings basically to the tried and true vocabulary of modern European sculpture, she is able to make her departures within the given framework intelligible precisely as such. Her interest in materials — in the Bauhaus sense — has led her to explore their capabilities in manifold ways. For example, *Torso Grande* (1967) is a piece of polished white marble formed into a rounded shape and looking like a Platonic archetype of white marble abstract sculpture. Another, *Torso*, however, of a similar solid, rounded configuration, and looking from a distance quite like any number of rough-surfaced stone sculptures one might have seen, is made of bronze. Simply, the surface is handled in a way which contradicts one's sense of what bronze should look like.

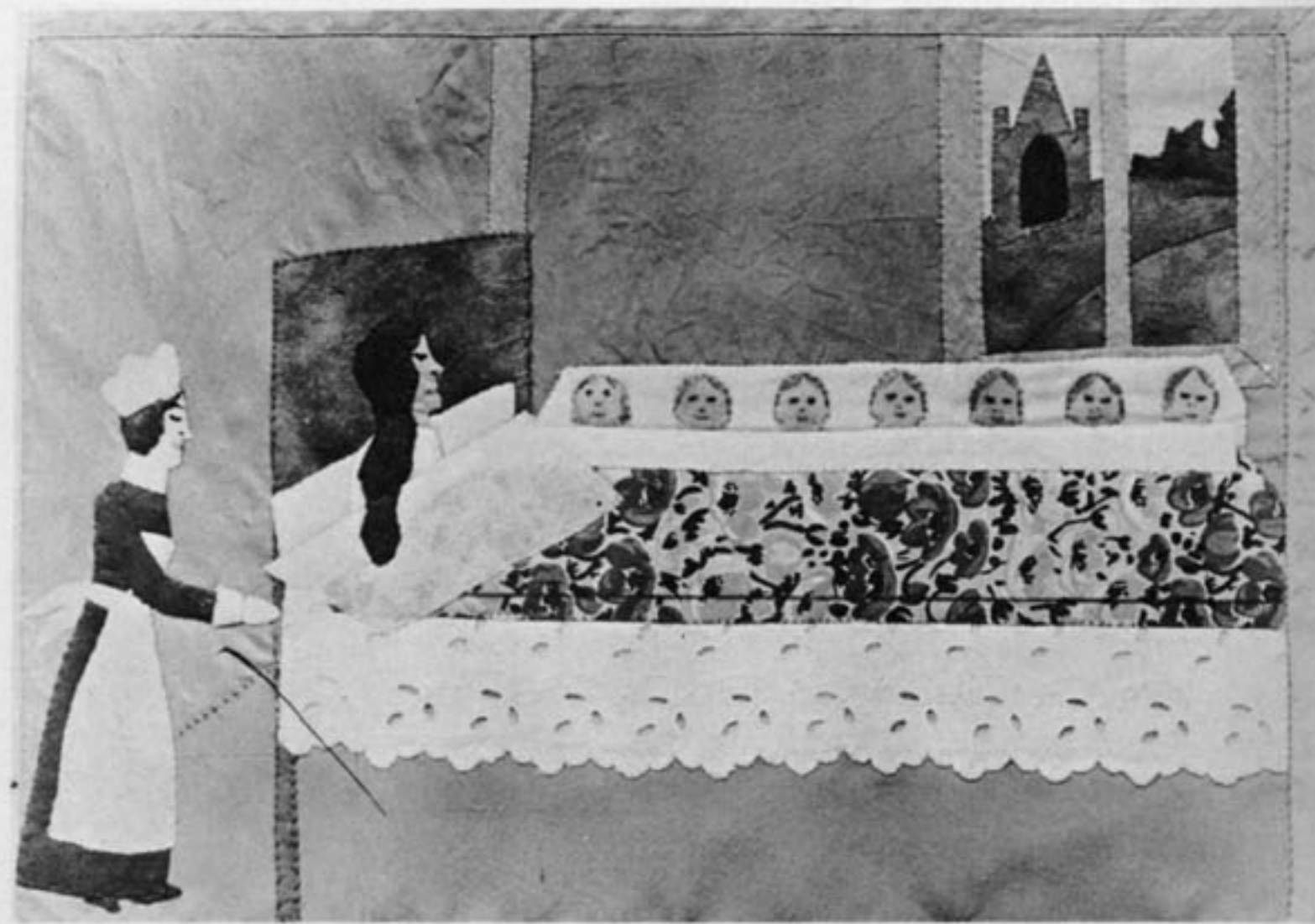
More obvious, in a distinctly clever way, is Schulthess's treatment of bronze to simulate wood. *Sedia del Re* (1967) is a modest chair within an 18-inch-high box. A panel on top of the box moves to let in a shaft of light. It is all bronze, carefully cast to simulate wood. There is a sort of humorous momentary pleasure in discovering the *trompe l'oeil*, besides the fact that the warmth and texture and weight of the bronze is *finer* than that of polished wood. On the whole, Schulthess's deliberate experiments in contradicting the orthodox uses of materials are far more interesting than her essays within a conventional sculptural vocabulary.

If anything, MEL RAMOS's women of 1967 are even more luscious, more unabashedly coy, and more perfectly composed than ever. They are not, however, quite so campy. Ramos has sacrificed a certain amount of his 1950-ish California kitsch for the sake of staying abreast of last year's commercial sex-symbolism as opposed to last decade's.

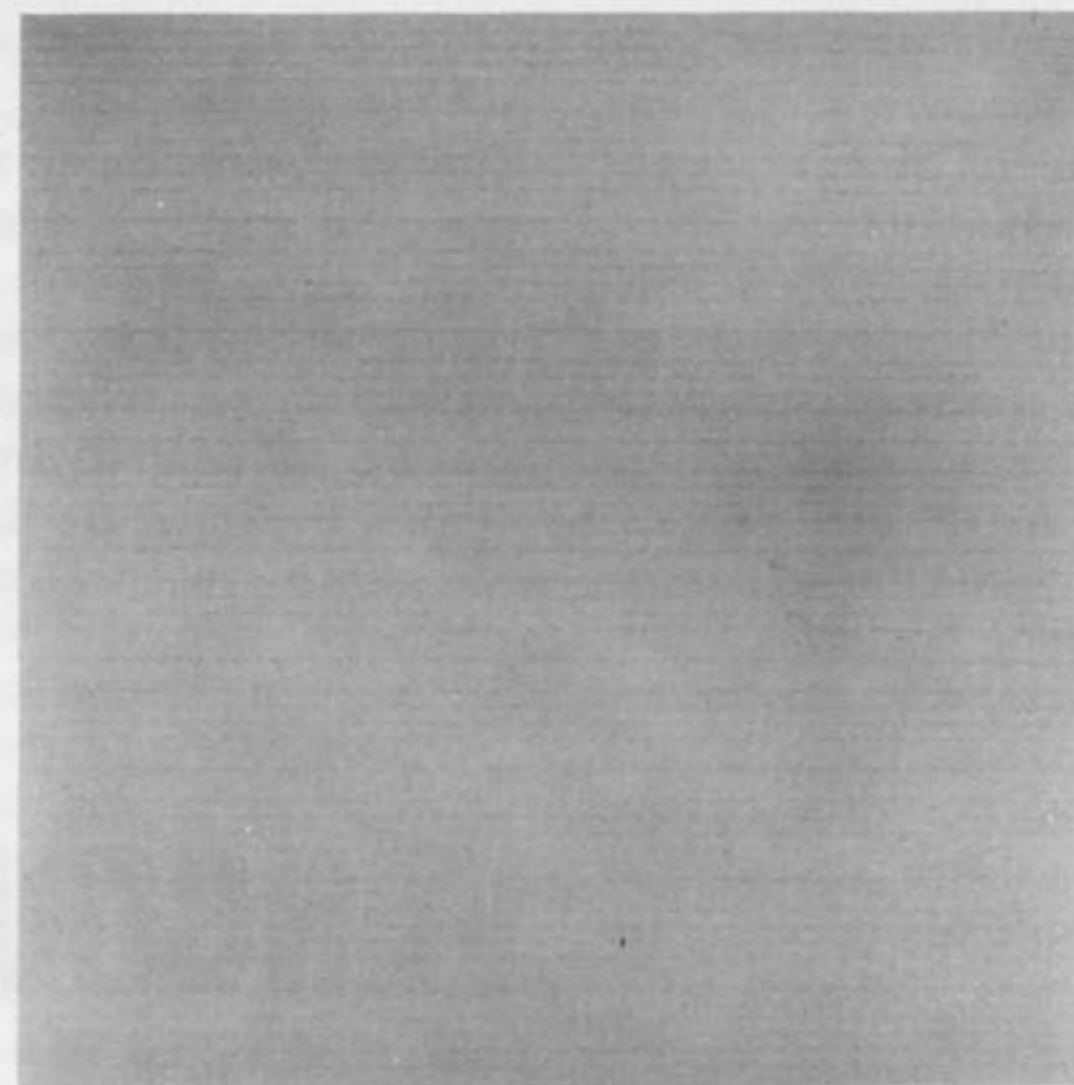
The main body of his new relief paintings shown at the David Stuart Gallery are about as chic as well-filled out females can be these days. *Pucci Pants* is a direct mockery of the ubiquitous angular postures of contemporary fashion models; against a lush yellow rectangle, on which is painted a lush yellow-haired face, the artist has appended in relief a black and white Pucci body with legs splayed elegantly apart, ending at the bot-



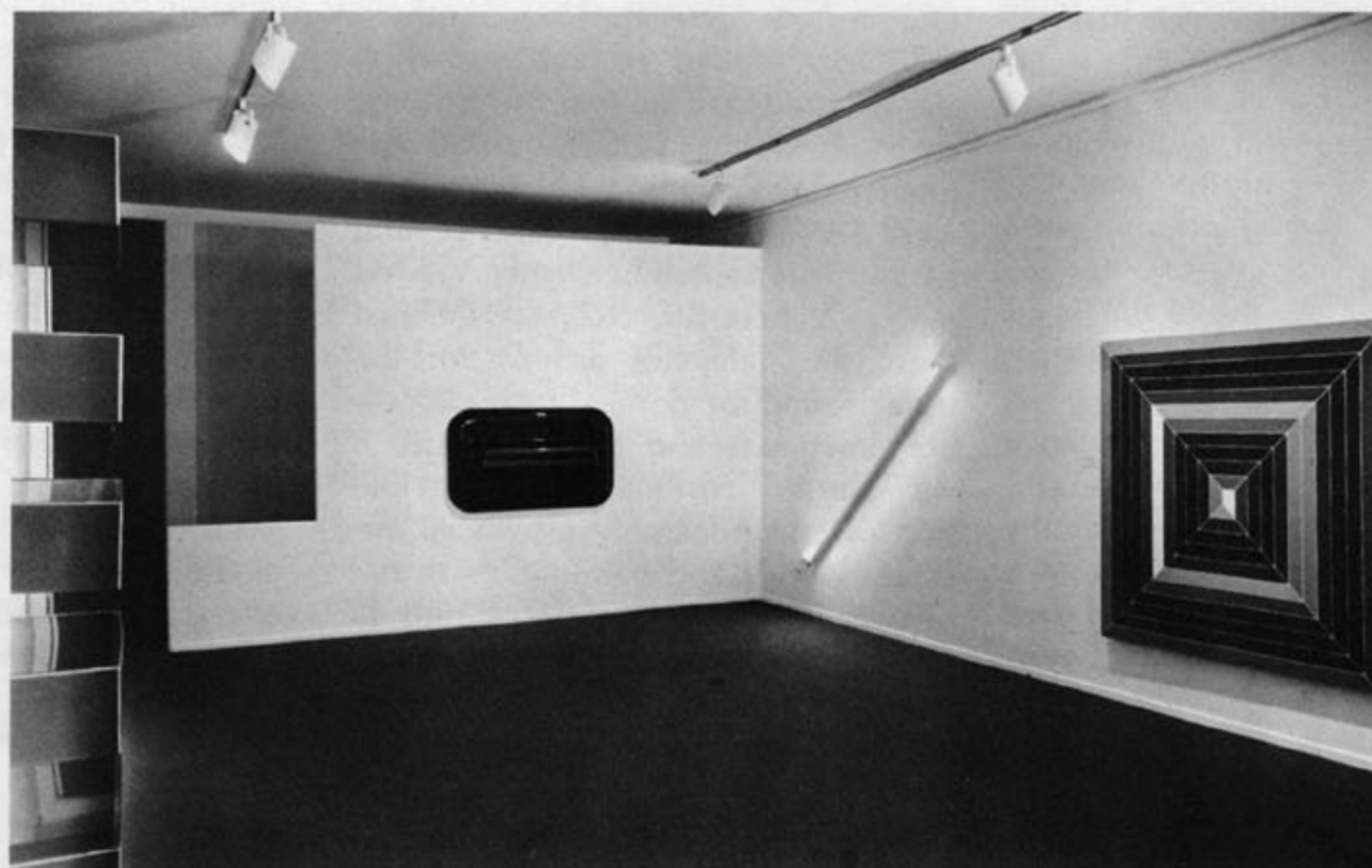
Amalia Schulthess, *Sedia del Re*, bronze, 18"h. 1967. Esther-Robles Gallery.



Elizabeth Allen, *Population Explosion*, 11x16". Fleischer Anhalt Gallery.



Agnes Martin, *The Journey*, acrylic, pencil on canvas, 72x72", 1967. Nicholas Wilder Gallery.



Installation view, Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles; l. to r. Kauffman, Flavin, Stella.