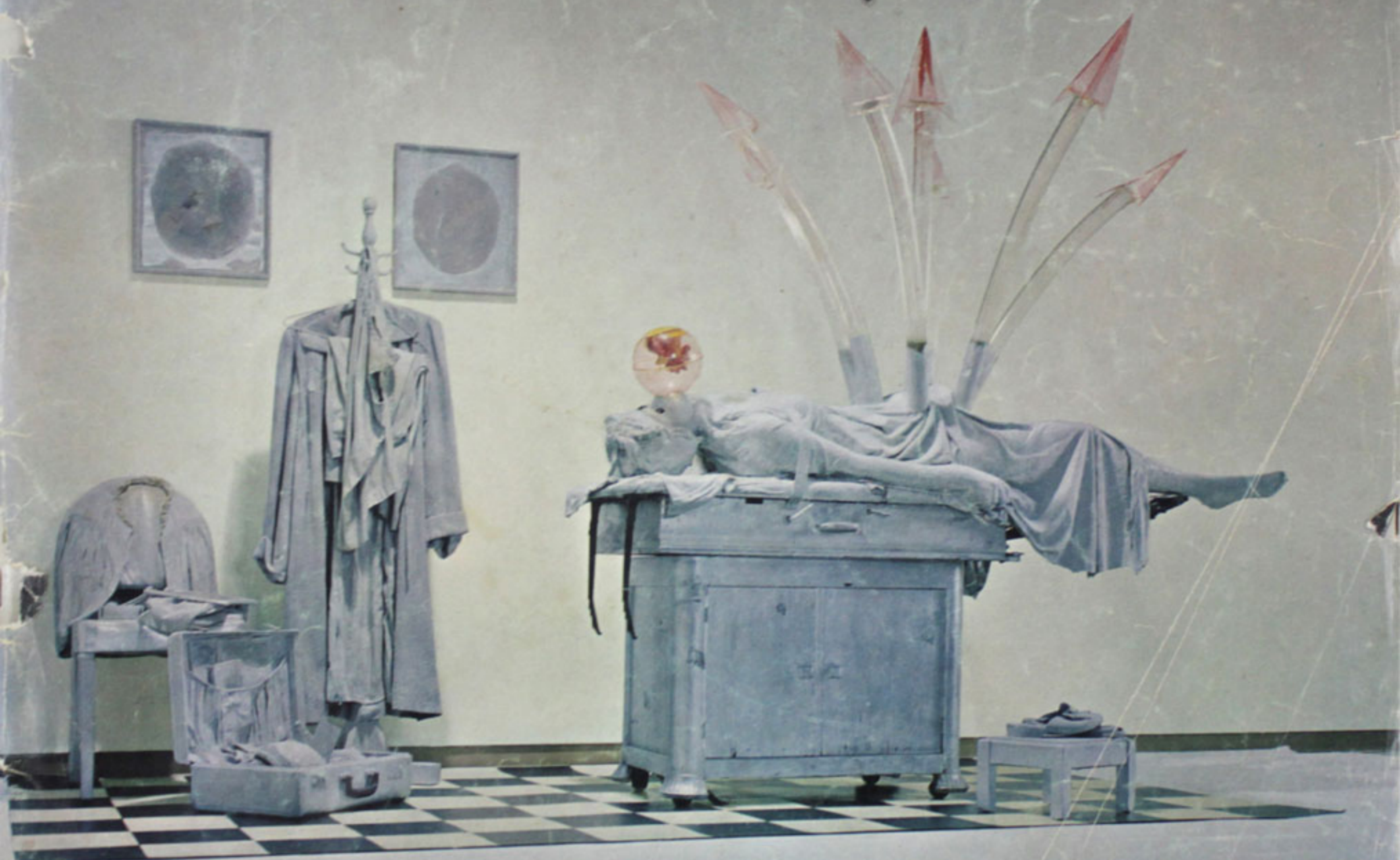


ONE DOLLAR

ARTFORUM

*Coyanne
Pg 21*



THE LOS ANGELES SCENE TODAY



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INSIDE COVERS: The new Los Angeles County Museum. At left is the building which will contain the museum's permanent collections. Center, exhibition galleries, right, educational activities building, member's lounge, auditorium, etc.

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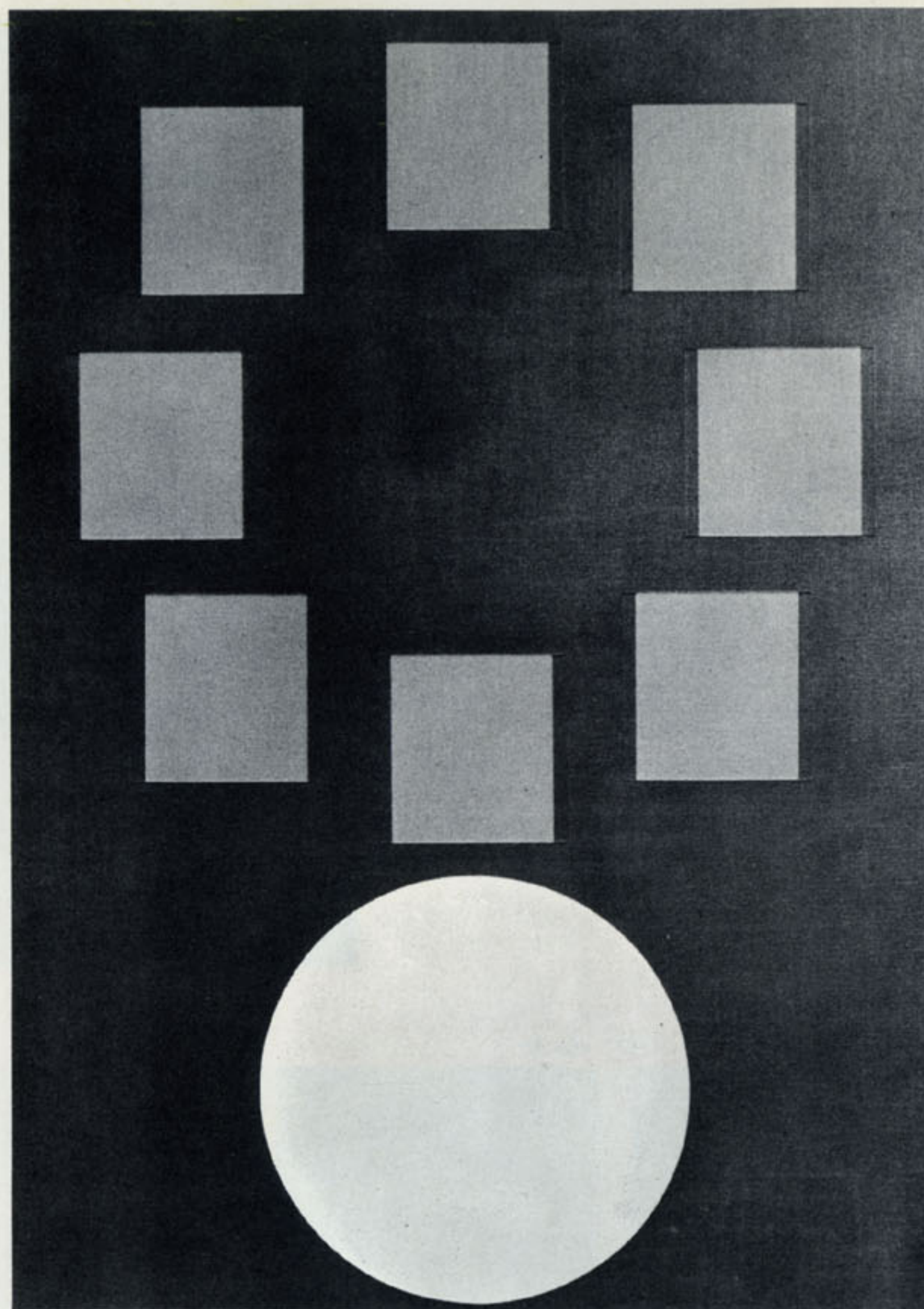


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Frederick Hammersley, "Follow," 32 x 24", 1963.



Karl Benjamin, "Red-Orange Squares, Yellow-Green Circle, Green Field," 51 x 36", 1964.

THE COOL SCHOOL

PHILIP LEIDER

The avant-garde today is that part of the creative world which perceives most clearly the extent to which all the forms and conventions of art (all the arts) have been exhausted. Avant-garde artists today are characterized not so much by what they produce as New (that would be a Renaissance) but by that quick intelligence which perceives, in despair and in disgust, what is already "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable" in the artistic means still current. The word "crisis," used so commonly in all the arts today, has its deepest reference to the condition which arises when the most advanced artists see, with agonizing clarity, the emptiness of the conventions of their art before they can conceive of what means, forms, conventions, the new must adopt. In periods like ours, the crisis is perpetual: no sooner is there a breakthrough—say one like Abstract Expressionism—than the most avant-garde minds already begin to fidget in their boredom, already begin to give play to their sense of the ludicrous and the absurd, already see quickly how it works, and the form is vitiated, exhausted, good for parody only. Hounded by an intelligence so rapacious, a grasp of the movement of art so clear, we find the avant-garde today almost always involved in either parodying forms which the rest of the world is only just beginning to discover, or busy in that touchy, tentative exploration of exhausted forms which may lead to some new expression.

By this irritating, odd definition, the avant-garde in Los Angeles today consists of a group of artists loosely grouped around the painter, Robert Irwin, and the sculptor, Kenneth Price, and loosely connected with the Ferus and the Rolf Nelson galleries: the most prominent include Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Edward Ruscha, Joe Goode, and Lynn Foulkes. Taken as a group, the Los Angeles avant-garde may be producing the most interesting and significant art being produced in America today.

A tendency to play over forms and ideas which, in the hands of previous artists (previous: in our times, this can mean as recently as six months ago) have already died, and a tendency toward parody and inversion—after we have passed these two generalities, other characteristics which an avant-garde may share become harder to isolate. It would be surprising if, after a movement as earth-shaking as Abstract Expressionism, some ideas would not seem to take the

form of a reaction. Thus, a hatred of the superfluous, a drive toward compression, a precision of execution which extends to the production of any trifle, an impeccability of surface, and, still in reaction, a new distance between artist and work of art, between artist and viewer, achieved either by jocular parody, the inclusion of irreverent touches and symbols, or, above all, by the precise, enclosed nature of the work of art itself: where an Abstract Expressionist canvas begs to be touched, a construction of Larry Bell's, for example, cries: "Hands Off!" (This quality of distance, coldness, austerity has become the trademark of Ferus Gallery installations.)

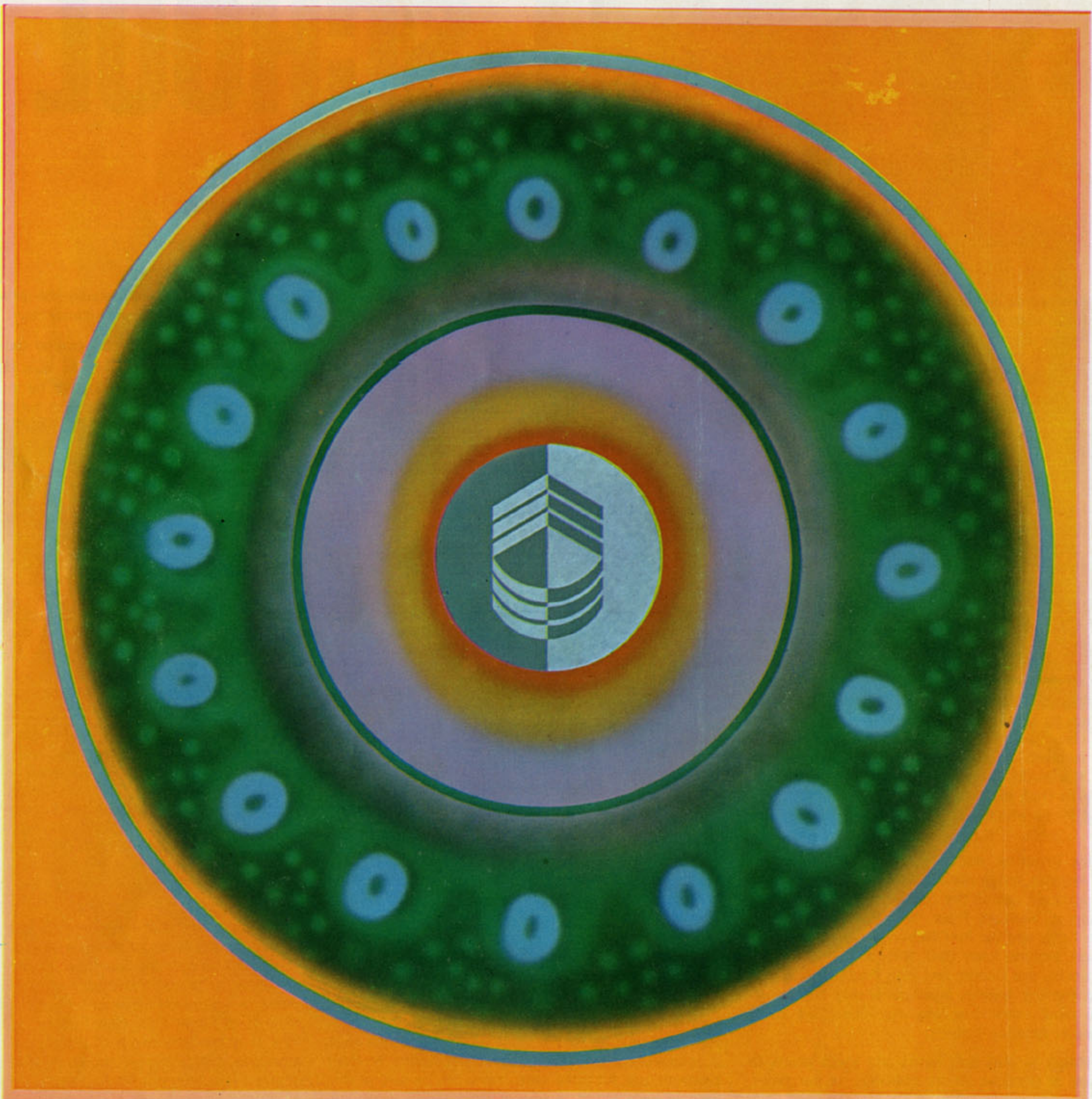
The dismal failure of Pop Art—its inability to engage an observer on an esthetic level—did not blind avant-garde artists everywhere to the possibilities it presented. An all-important dead-pan look, an invitation to the use of commonplace or absurd objects, either as device or as a non-tired means of introducing specific content, or, perhaps most important, as a signal preventing association with other modes, were valuable ideas. The chevron in a well-known series of Bengston paintings serves this purpose at least: it warns the viewer away from seeking in this work the kind of ambiguous, murky, but meaning-charged "sign" for which the Abstract Expressionists so diligently searched. (The way in which they searched can no longer be used, but to some of the artists in this group, the idea is not exhausted. There is a distinct relationship between that idea and the ambiguous, disturbing but deeply and unspecifically communicative egg-pod shape that Price has evolved. Nor is that idea completely separated from the vaguely sinister, haunting forms of mountain humps that Foulkes charged so full of strange meaning; but in Foulkes, the element of parody always draws us up short.)

The Pop element comes up harder in Ruscha, and also in the work of Richard Pettibone and Philip Hefferton, but we find in none of the three less than a consummate understanding of the failure of their predecessors. All three seek—none can be said at this time to have found—a way of more significantly employing the conventions of the mode. Hefferton looks to a quality of satire that will be spared the heavy-handed, intolerable mush, for example, of the Lurie NO school. Ruscha seeks a series of devices which will underscore his formal interests, precision of execution and perfection of placement, which will at the

same time avoid, and parody, the prissiness which usually characterizes these concerns.

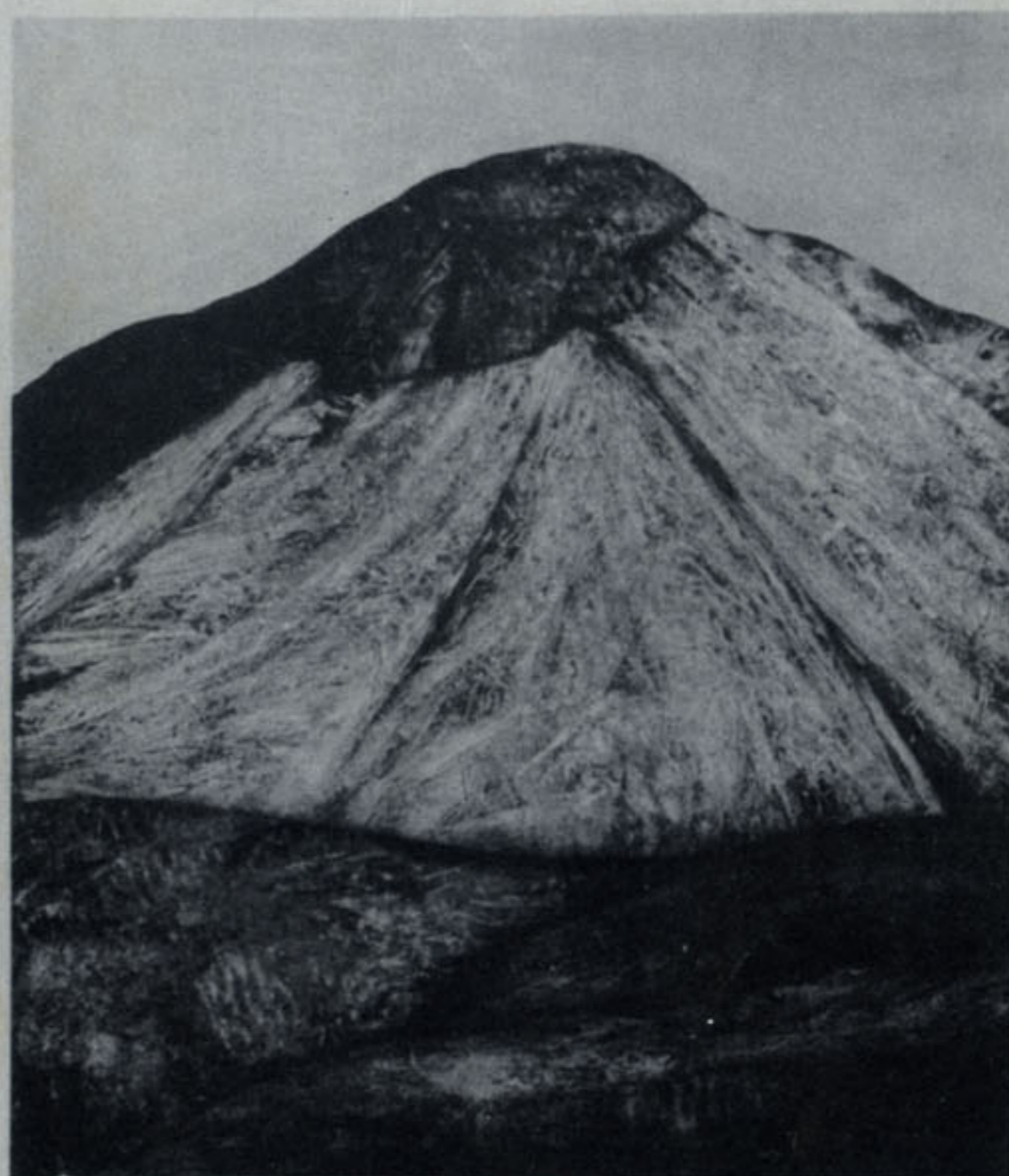
A disdain for the superfluous and the merely ornamental, a feeling that anything less than the most compressed statement is fat, sloppy and boring has been a characteristic of progress in all the arts in our times, perhaps because only such a statement approximates the ideal of the complete, inspired, untinkered-with work of art, invulnerable to the acid-spray of criticism. The two or three rigid, narrow bands that traverse the feathered field of color in a painting by Robert Irwin supply an extraordinary quality of tension to the canvas by a perfect minimum of means, and his stern example informs the approach to the creation of a work of art by many artists of the Los Angeles avant-garde whose interests are not at all directly related to Irwin's. Of enormous interest is the manner in which Joe Goode, for example, seeking a quite different kind of expression, respects these same assumptions. Employing the same feathered field of color as background, he sets his object—in a previous series, an actual milkbottle, in his most current work, a drawn, nondescript one or two-family house—as austere in relation to the color field as Irwin sets his traversing bands. Irwin's interest is an esthetic engagement on the highest abstract level. Goode's work has specific moral overtones, achieved by the presentation of objects which are intended to evoke specific associations. What they have in common is a clear and tough understanding of how difficult it is to give these different ends life in the context of the perpetual crisis in which modern art finds itself.

The mess of "post-Abstract Expressionist" exhibitions currently being broken out by museums, dealers and critics all over the country testifies to another use of the word "crisis." Abstract Expressionism is dead! There is a vacuum! What is to fill it? This: Pop Art! This: Hard Edge! This: New Figures! This: New Realism! It is not very much of a crisis, though dealers, museums, critics and art magazines may feel it strongly, and it is exactly this step-up-and-place-your-bet view of artistic crisis that is completely rejected by a true avant-garde. For these, each new "post-this" and "post-that" exhibition brings only another view of what is stale and empty of life. Today's avant-garde may be longer than dealers and museums and critics would like in bringing forth the New: their most pressing task is the elimination of the old. ■



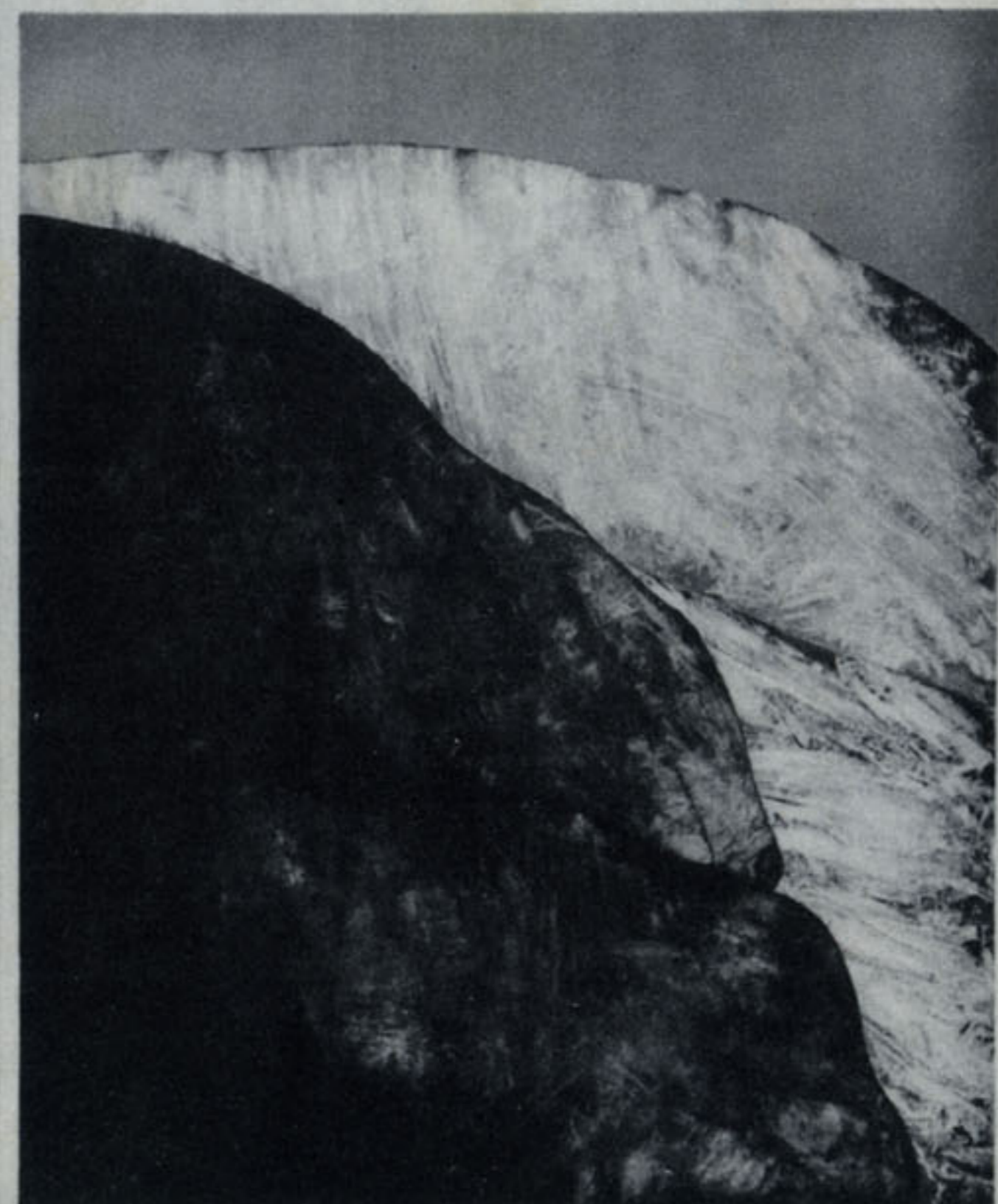
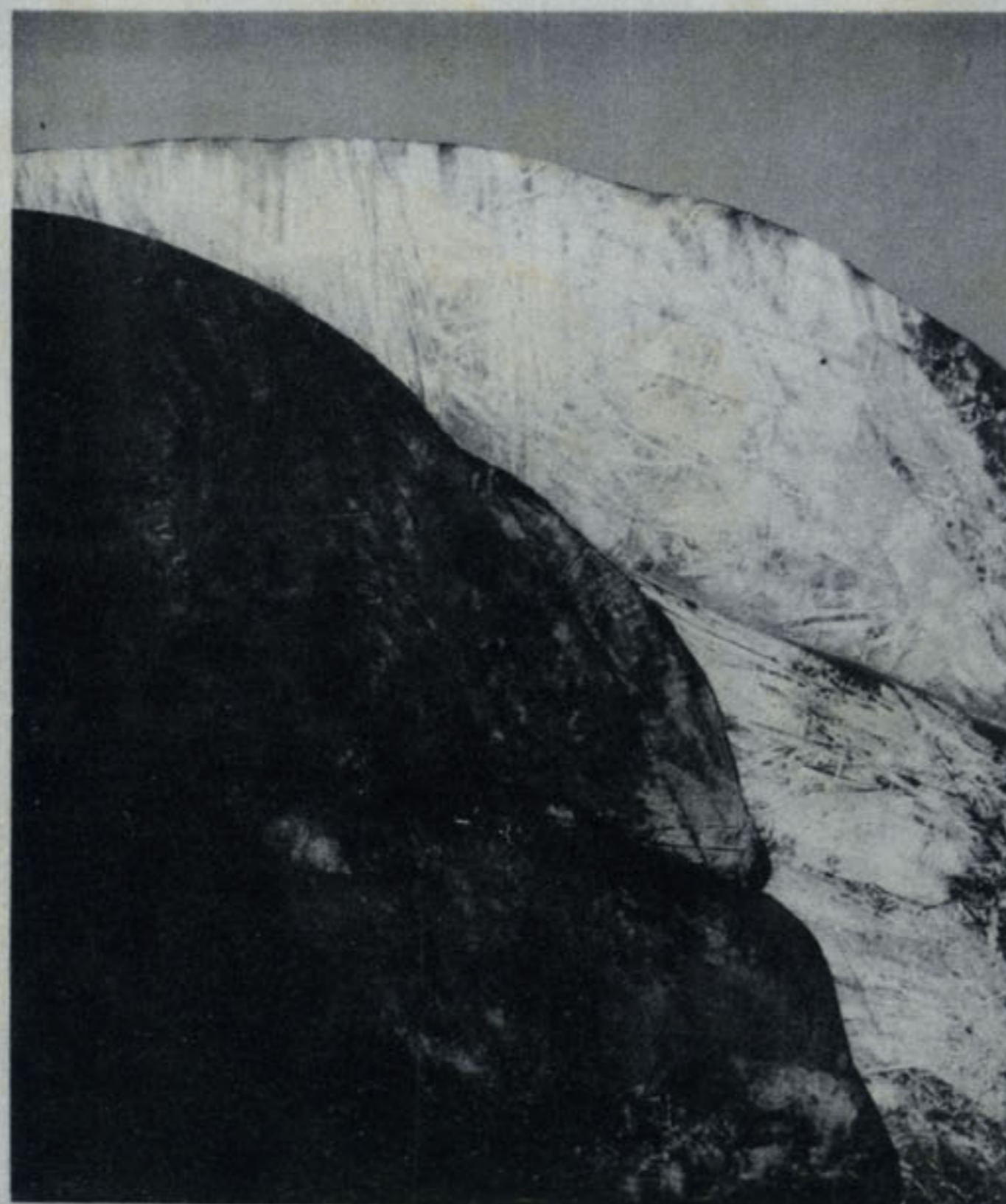
(Color Courtesy Eureka Press, Los Angeles, California.)

Billy Al Bengston, "Troy," Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Don Factor.



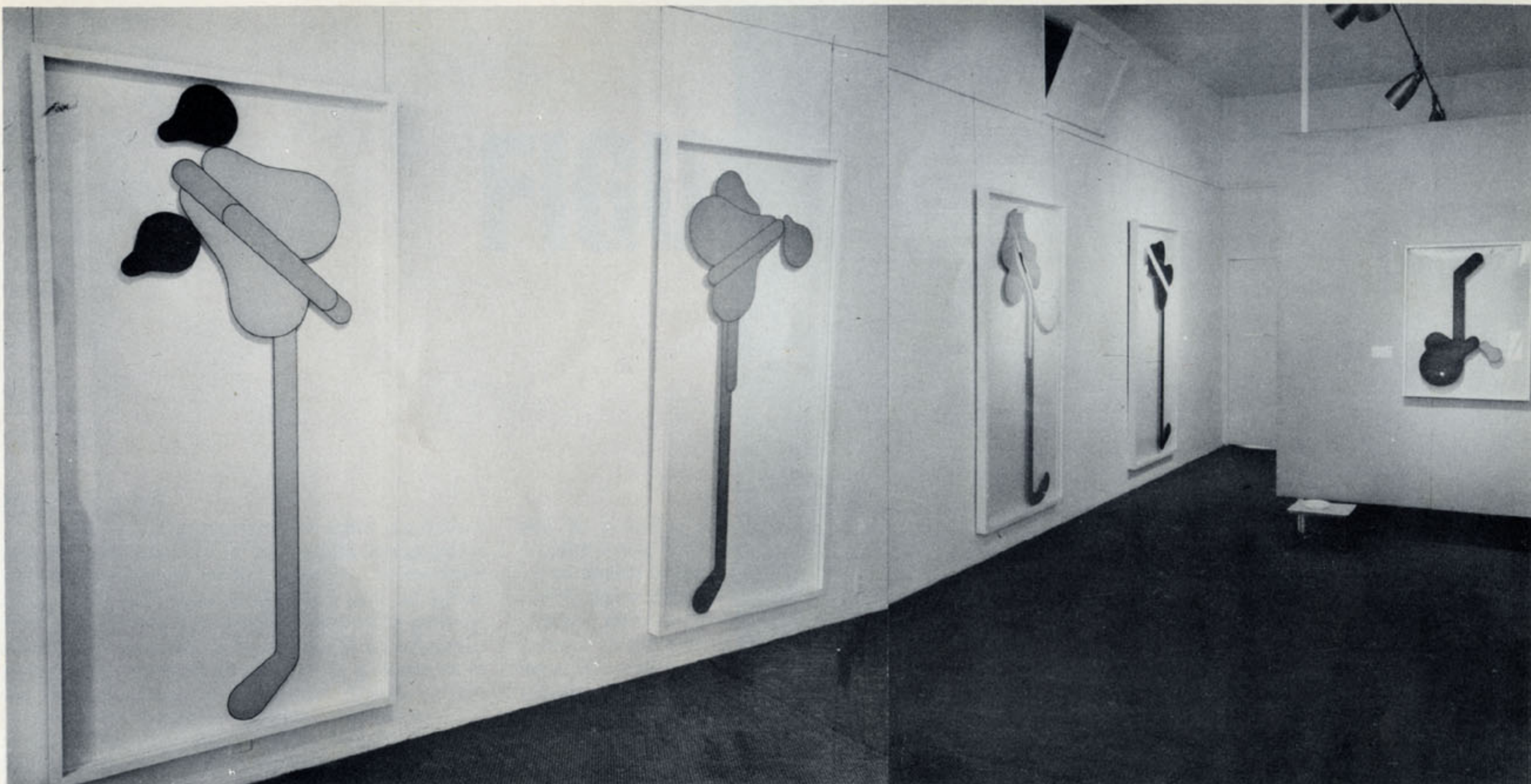
Llyn Foulkes, "Zabriskie Point," 65x108", 1964.

Llyn Foulkes, "Untitled," 65x108", 1964.





Joe Goode, "The Most of It," 24 x 24", 1963.



Installation View of Craig Kauffman Exhibition, Ferus Gallery, 1964.

Richard Pettibone, "untitled," 11 x 34", 1963.

