

Craig Kauffman

Extracts from *Craig Kauffman* by Jane Livingston¹

In his new work, Craig Kauffman has made a seemingly subtle but definitive break with his own past. He continues to make plastic wall-supported "paintings," and his work must be viewed as belonging to a prevalent trend among Los Angeles artists. The most patent deviation from his previous manner is simply the elimination of iconic detail: he appears, in other words, merely to have moved in a familiar direction toward formal simplification, rejecting identifiable mannerisms in favor of unembellished, multiply-produced objects. However, within a format which is apparently freer of the artist's idiosyncratic stamp than before, Kauffman retains the best elements of his previous work. The present move into unfragmented three-dimensional shape clarifies some of his objectives from the past and avoids other former concerns altogether. Through knowledge gained from his own experience in handling plastics, as well as technological advances in coloring plexiglass, he now bases his esthetic primarily on a sophisticated treatment of the material itself rather than elements of configuration. It is not as if he has "stripped away" or "boiled down" to arrive at the present forms: in fact, the terms of the new work are better characterized as a synthetic advance than as a break from, or rejection of, former ideas.

The two 1967 series comprise eight 34 1/4 x 57 x 8 1/4 inch objects, all vacuum formed from the same mold, and a larger group of twelve (54 x 76 x 13 1/4 inches) which are identical in format. In the first series, there are two each in standard colored blue, green, red and orange plexiglass. They are rectangular with rounded corners, swelling out from the wall in two stages, culminating in a rectangular protruberance in the center which is indented slightly along its outer face. Thus it is essentially a clear, primarily geometric (secondarily biomorphic) form, with only one salient complication in the third dimension. There is nothing elusive in the general shape. Naturally the works vary enormously from one to another because of the differences in color. Color becomes more important, independently of lineation, than ever

before in Kauffman's work.

Kauffman originally cast the first series in uniformly colored plexiglass. He discovered that by spraying the inner surface of the centrally protruding form so that it became virtually opaque, the entire aura of the piece was enriched, and he finally did this to most of the works. He also used Murano paint to coat the inner surfaces of all but two of the works in the smaller series. This produces an effect which is similar in principle to glass-coating: the color actually shifts in value with the curvature of the form. Uniform translucency facilitated clear immediate perception of the work's dimensions (particularly thickness), and the shadows cast from the interior edge were relatively sharp. By obscuring the middle section, a certain ambiguity and softness resulted.

In a way that enlarges upon the intelligible illusionistic duality in Larry Bell's rodium coated glass boxes, Kauffman's works demonstrate that austerity is not necessarily the measure of success in detailless object art. Kauffman's use of plastics has nothing at all to do with the striving for ultra-concrete, self-referential presence in recent non-detailed or serial-form sculpture. His plastic paintings are enormously seductive: they invite both identification and actual reflection. The sheer surface beauty of colored plexiglass stimulates distrust, partly because it has been so often badly used. In many ways it is easier to cope with neutral or intrinsically boring materials. Owing to the inherent difficulties in handling highly reflective and translucent surfaces, artists using glossy finishes have largely tended to take subterfuge in either crassly eccentric or utterly neutral underlying form. On the whole, those artists working in highly reflective materials who have attempted to find a middle ground between utter simplicity and arrestingly anomalous form have fallen short, to varying degrees, of thoroughly compelling results.

Kauffman has eschewed both studied austerity and awkward figuration: for all their cerebrated refinements, the works are surprisingly undemanding of the spectator and ultimately ingenuous. Their success, insofar as it is analyzable, rests in a synthetic phenomenon. What is at issue in the two 1967 series is the artistic efficacy of a concrete entity which is non-iconic and yet refers to more than itself. The works are small enough to be easily perceived and fully oriented *in toto* from a fairly short distance. But they are comprehended as gaining substance from exterior sources, while existing entirely within a prescribed and intrinsic set of terms: theoretically they do not require a specific set of environmental conditions under which they are most advantageously seen. In other words, the object is seen as more than a static, contained body while remaining integral apart from a determined ambience. Illusory variables become equally as important as literal knowledge of the object, but not more important. The potential for illusionism is not based upon spatial or structural *trompe l'oeil* but is embodied in the material. It comes into play immediately and always on an identical plane with the experiencing of the actual, legible surface of the object.

¹Jane Livingsone, "Recent Work by Craig Kauffman," *Artforum*, vol. 6, no. 6, Feb. 1968, pp. 36-39.