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COVER: Anthony Caro, *Prairie*, steel, 3'2" x 19'1" x 10'6", 1967. (Lewis Cabot, USA). (Color courtesy Kasmin Gallery, London.)

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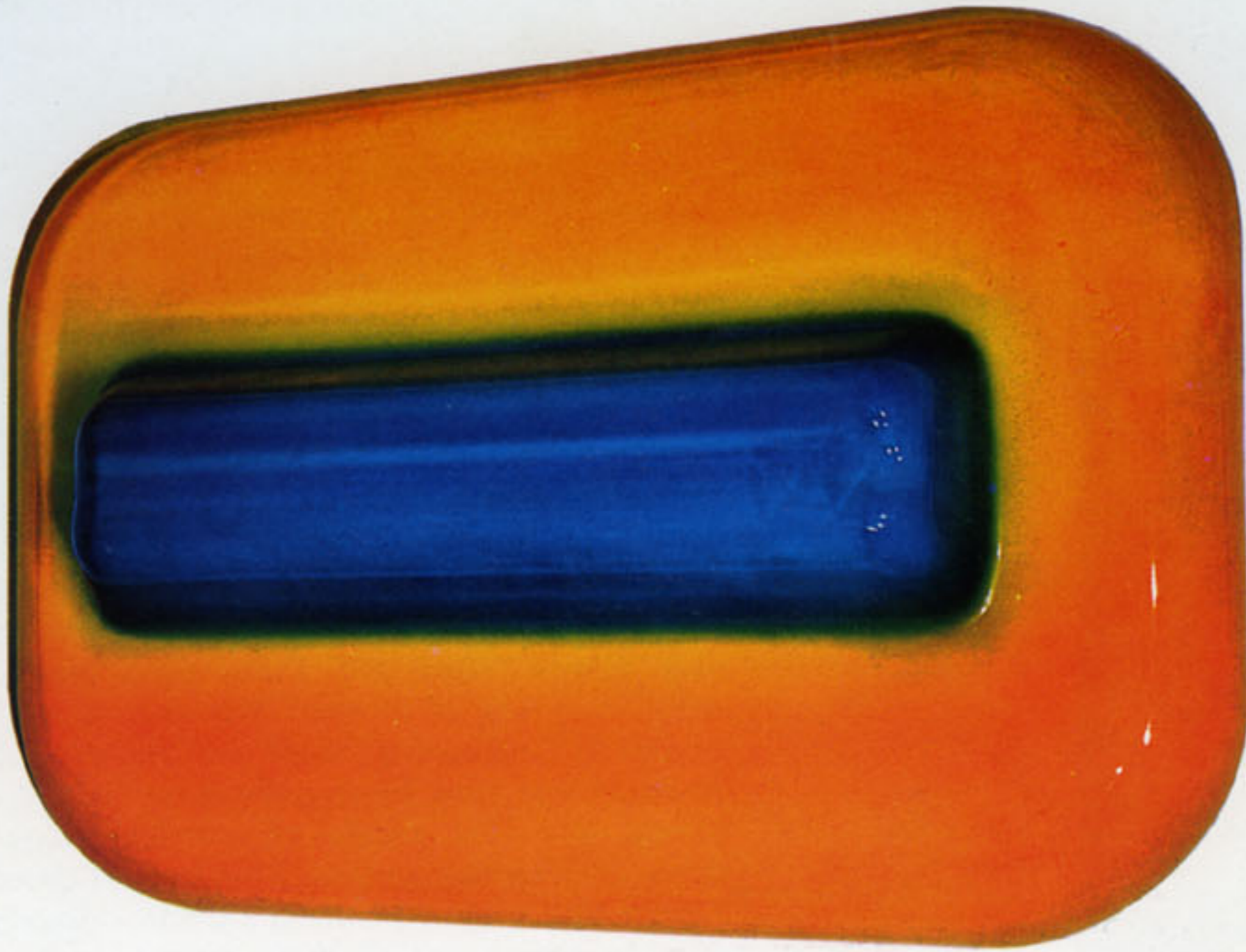
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Craig Kauffman, untitled, plexiglass, 1967. (Color Courtesy Pace Gallery.)

RECENT WORK BY CRAIG KAUFFMAN
“... a new, non-pictorial set of terms.”



Craig Kauffman, untitled, plexiglass, 196 (Color Courtesy Pace Gallery.)

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.

Kauffman's approach has been fundamentally that of a painter. During the late fifties and early sixties he was under the direct sway of the San Francisco painterly-abstract artists, and his work from that period is solidly indicative of the lingering Abstract Expressionist esthetic. The overriding tendency in this period is toward calligraphy rather than color-field composition or sweeping brushwork. In the best of these paintings his extraordinarily singular touch—sometimes bordering on eccentricity even within the most traditional genre—and his lasting exploitation of controlled, hesitant line as an expressive means are already clearly evident.

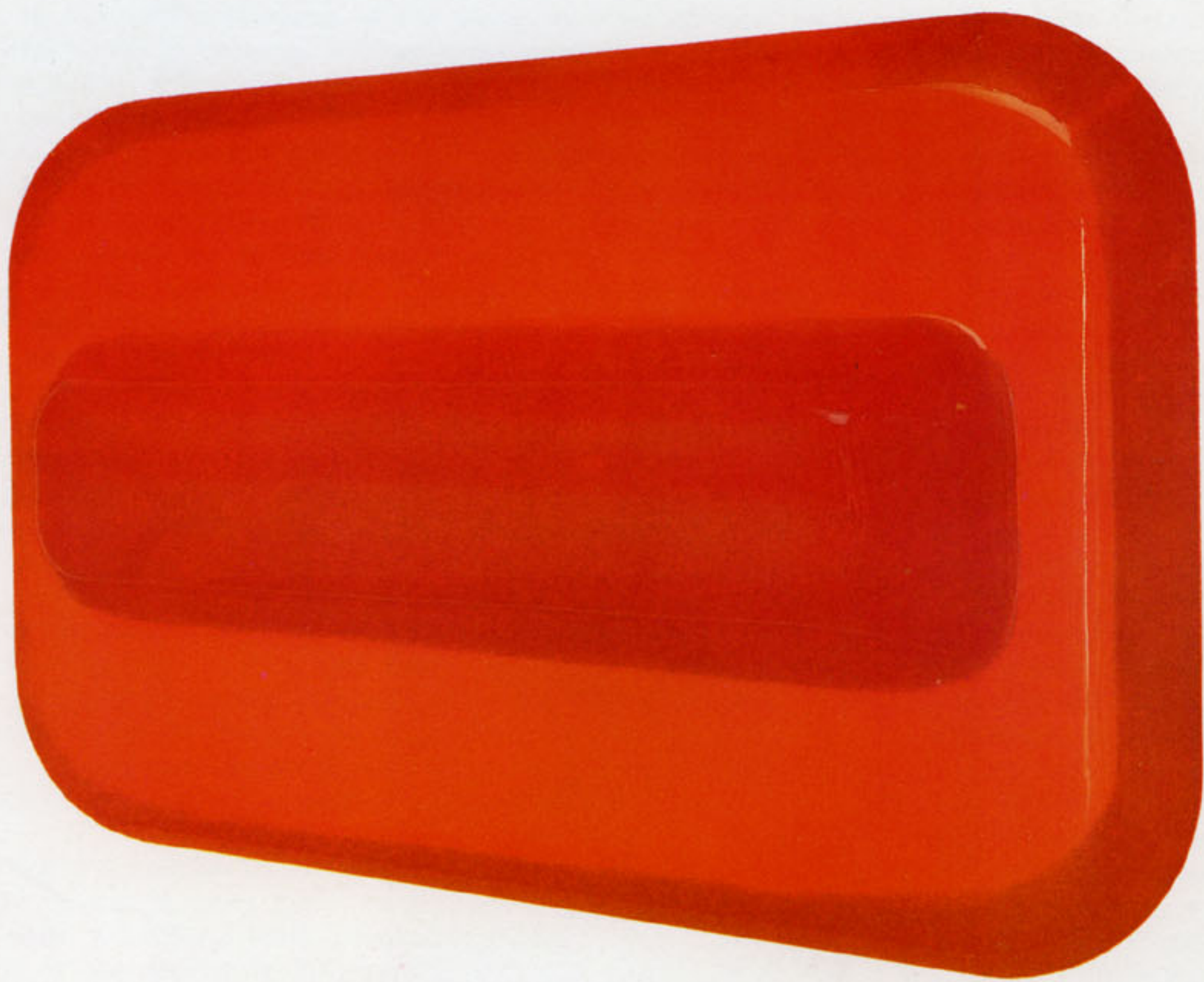
When he began to make factory-produced plastic pictures in late 1963, his natural bent towards a gestural, morphological vocabulary continued. He moved from two- into three-dimensional wall hung plastic objects, developing further the organic, limbed shapes with which he is typically associated, and then from isolated emblematic shapes to a less pictorial conception of form. The latter disposition was realized in 1966 in a series with continuous undulating surfaces, slanted sharply back to the edge of the support on the two vertical sides. He traced the edges created by these two intersecting planes with a contrasting color so that they would be literally read as line.

The progression, then, was from broken, nervous line in the early paintings to the hard, clean line of the emblematic-organic shapes, and finally to a thin wavering line created by obtrusive ver-

tical edges. In the 1966 series, the total shape of the object began to supersede the importance of internal linearism. Basically the later conception relates more closely to the diversified, hesitant brushwork of the early sixties paintings than to the major body of the work in plastic, and thus the firm silhouetted shapes of the middle period are digressionary in this context. It is only in Kauffman's most recent series that line ceases to function in an iconic or gestural way. The new works begin to be at least as much objects as they are pictures. They are unitary forms in a sculptural sense.

The full momentousness of Kauffman's shift into

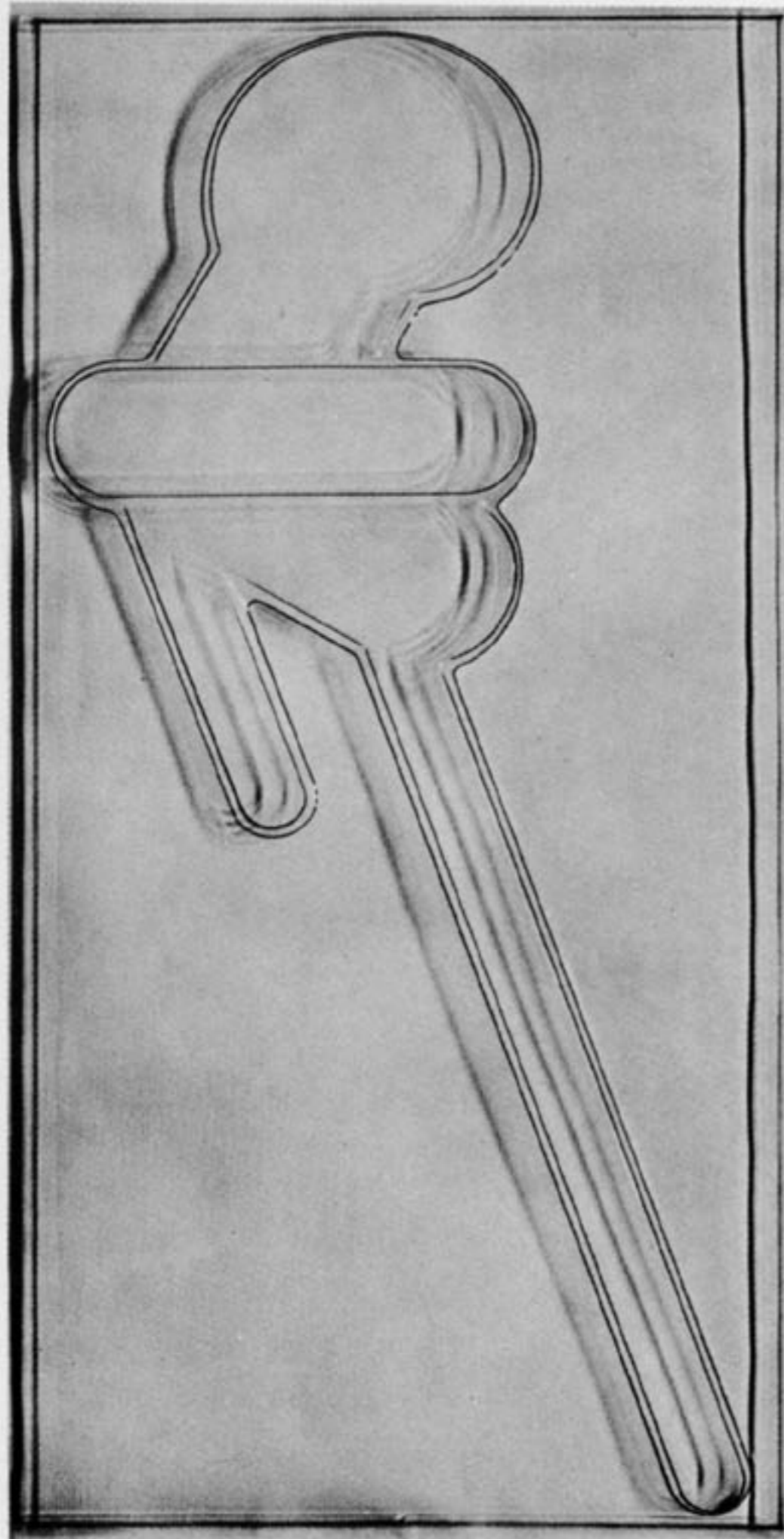
the first 1967 series is not immediately perceptible. His stylistic evolution has been consistently metagenetic rather than gradual and coherent, but not revolutionary at any point. Nevertheless, despite his apparent habit of proceeding in a continuously reflexive or reactive manner, he has only now broken through the pattern by allowing himself a new, non-pictorial set of terms. Characteristically, he did not move from his fundamentally expressionistic approach into the current non-gestural mode through manipulation of materials, but through an intellectual and intuitive process. The move into unitary form was accomplished not through tactile experimenta-



Craig Kauffman, untitled, plexiglass, 34 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 57 x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ " , 1967. (Pace Gallery.)



Craig Kauffman, untitled, plexiglass, 54 5/16x76 3/8x13 3/8", (yellow), 1967.



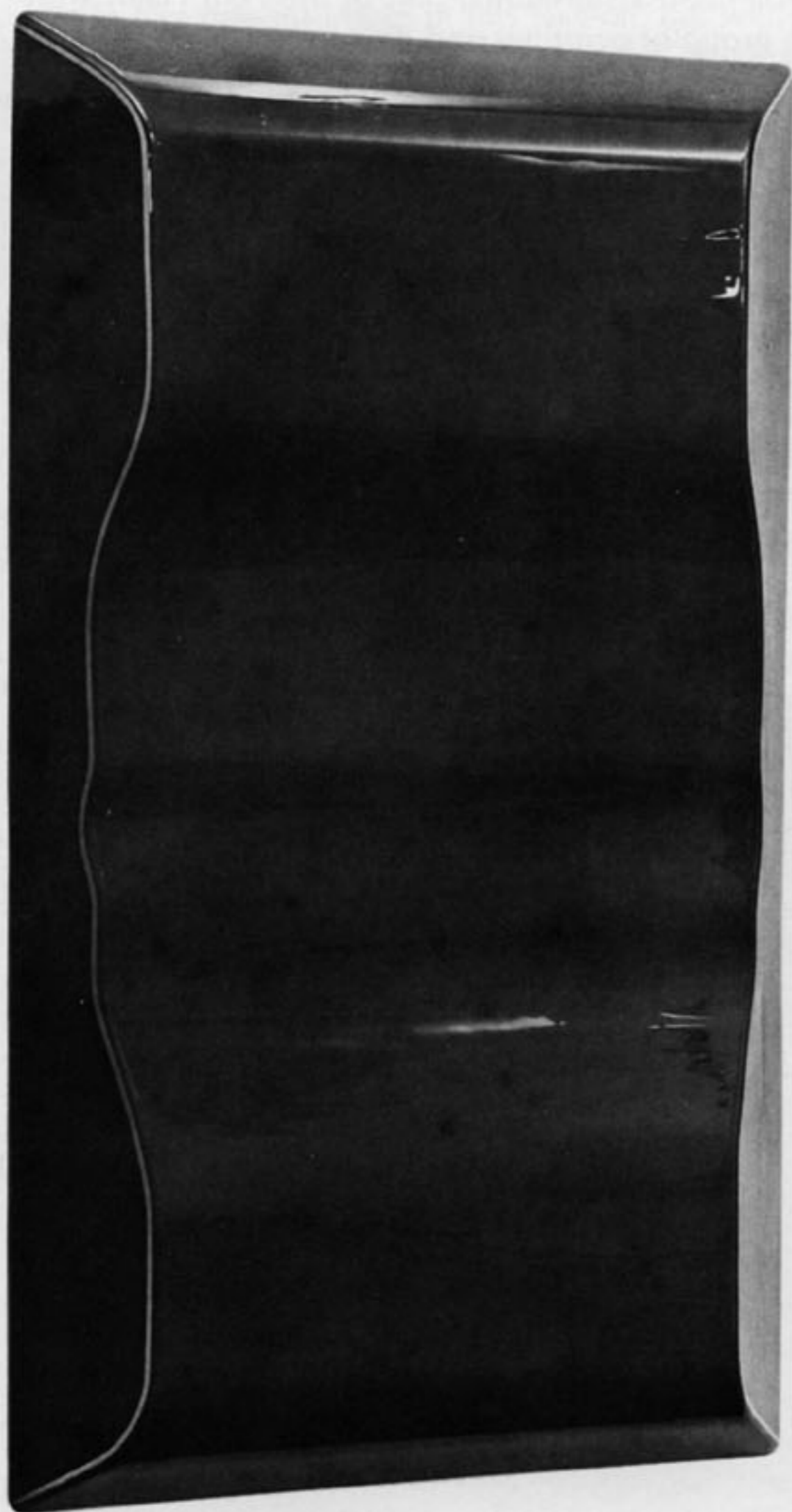
Craig Kauffman, *Light Green/Pink*, acrylic on plexiglass, 90x46 1/2", 1965.

tion but by a leap into what must initially have seemed a questionable domain. Moreover, his development scarcely reached a leveling-off point in the smaller 1967 series because he moved directly on to a new kind of complexity by enlarging the format and introducing two or more colors into each piece.

The two latest series comprise eight 34 1/4-by-57-by-8 1/4-inch objects, all vacuum formed from the same mold, and a larger group of twelve (54-by-76-by-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 protuberance 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.

The usual distinction between working in multiples and making serial forms has bearing on these series in regard to the artist's treatment of color. The works are not meant to be viewed sequentially, and yet they are partially interdependent. A system of complementary color relationships among them inevitably arises, and obviously one judges their relative success in terms of color. Contrary to expectation, the cool and warm tonalities do not necessarily project their respective associations with stasis vs. animation or recession vs. effluence. In the end, what counts is not so much the fine distinctions among the pieces of actual cast or saturation of the hue—they are all vivid and opulent—but the way in which the material is treated and illuminated to capitalize on side effects.

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 prin-



Craig Kauffman, untitled, vacuum molded plexiglass, 66½ x 36", 1966. (Pace Gallery.)

ciple 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.

The second group of works were formed in clear plexiglass and sprayed afterwards in two or more colors. Here Kauffman began with the intention of separating the two built-in segments of the form with a clean edge. But he found that softening the margin between colors produced an overall veiled character that gave much greater depth to the total appearance of the piece. In this series Kauffman becomes involved with more complex illusory effects than before. For example, in the work whose middle section is yellow, surrounded by deep pink to the edges, the boundary between the two colors is fuzzy and the grainy texture of the overlapping area continues, diminished, throughout the surface. The effect is of viscous materials melting together. In comparison to the even, glossy appearance of the smaller works this piece seems clogged with rich, weighted pigment. The turquoise and orange piece, on the other hand, is far more translucent; it has a thin, watery quality, at the same time brittle and ethereal. The slightly inflected surface casts a stippled reflection on the wall behind, imparting a character both of material insubstantiality and a sort of figurative or suggested luminal fluctuation in the space between the plastic and the wall. Standing close to it, as one moves his eye downward over the central turquoise protrusion, a startling series of changes is created by the blending of pigments: an entire range of shifting hues appears beyond the original, "real" sprayed colors.

In a way that enlarges upon the intelligible, illusionistic duality in Larry Bell's rhodium coated glass boxes, Kauffman's works demonstrate that austerity is not necessarily the measure of success in detail-less object art. (In a sense, it is remarkable that illusory properties have been conceptually isolated as though they were extraneous to the "real" substance. Concomitantly, the concept of new materials is still categorically novel enough that often one doesn't get far beyond technical elaboration to discover a work's particular value. Plastic is an especially difficult material

to deal with.)

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 badly used so often. 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. The list of local artists who have most successfully embraced one or the other of these alternatives would include Kenneth Price, Billy Al Bengston and John McCracken. 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, such as Tony DeLap, DeWain Valentine, Vasa and Norman Zammitt, have fallen short, to varying degrees, of thoroughly compelling results.

Kauffman has eschewed both studied austerity and awkward figuration: for all their celebrated 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. ■