

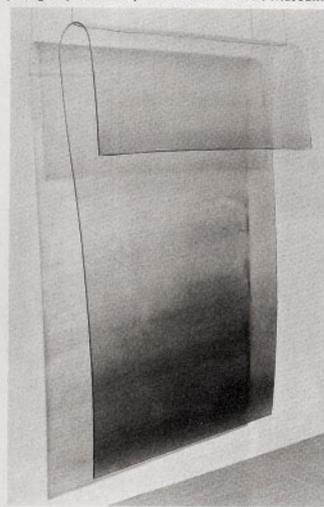
LOS ANGELES

CRAIG KAUFFMAN, RICHARD SERA, Pasadena Art Museum; ROBERT MORRIS, Irving Blum Gallery; ALEXANDER CALDER, Long Beach Museum of Art; AGNES MARTIN, Nicholas Wilder Gallery:

CRAIG KAUFFMAN, one of the first major artists of the "L.A. Look"—involved in prettiness, plastics and the nether-land between sculpture and painting—is shown in a mini-retrospective which brackets him from the time he hit his groove until opening night. It's informative for a viewpoint admittedly fashioned on a fractional and dissociated acquaintance, but it hasn't turned me around. Some pieces look better in the enlarged context, and some look worse, but the canned lushness and dustless craft are still not much more than clever and painstaking (which, perhaps, should be enough). Chronologically, the "survey" takes in "periods" from 1965 on, then features a roomful of Kauffman's most current and, compared to the rest, radical works.

Two metal-edged red and blue "erotic thermometers" from 1965 seem, with five years of esthetic distance and a proliferation of "plastic presences," a little dull now — too much like (and not any stronger than) objects inventoried in rows behind signmakers' shops. The next segment, some five-and-a-half feet high shallow wall boxes with bevelled edges and

Craig Kauffman, untitled, vacuum-formed plexiglass, 73x50x9", 1969. Pasadena Art Museum.



rippled facades, is more risky. Kauffman, in these pieces, is aware of the slugging among painting, object, and material and he tries a head-on device as a reconciler: a narrow, chromatically graduated striping near the front edges of the box. The striping attempts to distract us from the physical nature of the box, and from its too-pervasive plastic-ness by placing a (broadly speaking) painterly device on the surface; this sets up cross-references to the surface reflections prompted by the undulating facade, which, in turn . . . etc., etc. It works only partially, but the gamble is well-taken. Next are some round-cornered rectangles (half a foot deep) with central, horizontal protrusions in a contrasting color (e.g., a yellow dash bulging from a magenta ground), and more indigenous variation in the spray painting, perhaps a retrenchment toward painting *per se*. The best work in the show is from the 1968-69 group, in which the protrusion is nearly blended with the support, giving an almost semi-circular cross section, and differentiated only by some "shadowing" around the seam. This particular piece is more or less whitish silver, modulated by halting browns, greys, and, if I'm not fooled, pinks; it's the best because it seems compact, sure and relatively unconscious of novelty.

The intended thrust of the show is, however, a "scoop" on Kauffman's

new stuff. Why they fail may have something to do with the business of working in sets. It used to be called "obsessive image," but the only thing most artists these days are really obsessed with is *getting* an image with which to be obsessed. For a while, tight little groups were thought to be simply a reasonable, business-like approach to the art dodge; now it appears to be a stylistic folkway—unself-conscious, but requisite. The criteria of a set are that it retain enough of the "old look" to be identifiable (or credible) and possess enough "new look" to be publicly interesting. With plexiglass, the tendency toward sets is reinforced because esthetic changes involve actual re-tooling of the manufacturing process; as in automobiles, a yearly model change seems most viable. The big physical difference in Kauffman's new work is that it is open, not closed, and transparent, not opaque. There are six pieces in this part of the show, each a rectangular sheet of plexiglass, vacuum-formed into a simple looping fold about a quarter of the way down from the top edge, so that the "front" plane hangs about nine inches before the larger rear plane. The pieces hover a foot off the ground and a foot from the wall, suspended by a wire that descends to either side of the pieces and catches them by the armpits. Each item is colored a la Olitski-Rothko-Max Bill in a finely graduated partial spectrum. The press release maintains the works "intensify the colored light which they cast on the wall, creating an illusionistic effect that makes the wall seem to disappear." They don't (and can't) and it wouldn't affect the art quality if they could (superficial views of Robert Irwin's discs have made "disappearing" acts critically faddish). The new works seem to fail *in spite of* the "rightness" of everything: a new departure, but recognizably Kauffman; a further exploration of faint, decadent color effects; and a group of "honest" (hanging nakedly as they do) process-ish pieces. Why *don't* they work? Several possibilities: 1) the vocabulary—one fold, gradations, etc.—seems arbitrarily limited in the set-making; 2) the color is pretty, but only mechanically interesting; 3) the new use of plexiglass seems simplistic, rather than purified; 4) the light phenomena on the walls are too obvious and automatic; and 5) they don't seem to say anything except "I'm getting Rococo-er and Rococo-er."



Richard Serra, *Sawing: Base Plate Measure (12 Fir Trees)*, 12 red & white fir logs, concrete, 35' x 50' x 60", 1969. Pasadena Art Museum.