

MATTER AND SPIRIT
RONALD BLADEN
JIM CLARK
WILLEM DE KOONING
LARRY DEYAE
BILL JENSEN
AGNES MARTIN
JAN MULLER
MARK ROTHKO

curated by Emily Sorkin

*Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Gallery, Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont
(802)442-5401*

*Gallery hours 1 to 5 pm, Monday through Friday, October 1 to 24, 1985
Opening Tuesday, October 1, 7 to 9 pm*

This exhibition made possible through the generosity of Suzanne Lemberg Usdan.

Matter and Spirit

In this decade, with both subject and method of execution determined by the artist, the dangers of indulgent overabundance and visual excess are prevalent. The selection of art here concerns the moments of recognition when the artist combines idea, intuition, and material toward truth. These artists share the will to achieve an impossibility--the union of matter and spirit. An important quality is pushed to the extreme. The closer the artist comes to this quality the more elusive that quality--and the work of art--become. The living element becomes caught in art. Fairfield Porter expressed this notion when he talked about Rothko: "Art permits you to accept illogical immediacy, and in doing so releases you from chasing after the distant and ideal. When this occurs, the effect is exalting."

In a Rothko, there is little evidence of real physical substance. The paint dissolves, color and form recede. This is a paradox, as the work is crowding right on top of you, filling the space. Thin paint covers the surface from which arises a force field of light. There is no skeletal structure holding the work together. Maybe a field of light holds it together. Something within this vaporous luminosity--mortality, perhaps, which we resist--pulls us down endlessly into nothing.

The physicality of Ronald Bladen's paint lets you experience it as something real, insisting on its objectivity. This painting by Bladen is two colors--a dark, dense surface with a few even denser areas of light color. These light areas seem to fall forward in a prescribed direction while casting a vast space between them. We don't know how the light areas got there, but feel they are in an exact arrangement: lumps of paint with a thousand miles between them. As in the Rothko, the elusive quality in Bladen's work overpowers us, and by some miraculous catharsis, substitutes fear of isolation with a pendular feeling of resolution.

De Kooning's paintings reveal lifelong unity despite an outer evolution of idiom and form. Early work, in particular this painting from 1937, seem rooted in still-life, a still-life of anthropomorphic shapes that is finished looking, like a Leger or a Miro. Nonetheless, De Kooning's forms resist becoming anthropomorphic objects, though they refer to volume. They are free and unspecific, leaving an ineffable, neutral space in their wake. No matter how puzzling the form and subject are, there is always the sense of an existing equivalent in nature.

In Bill Jensen's work there is a polarity between the expression of biological instinct, and that of intuition and feeling. Jensen's form, like that of de Kooning's, expresses an absoluteness, although their subjects may not be apparent. In Jensen's painting Fragile, a fetal element floats in gem-like colors. This element appears as an encased pink volume, which then fluctuates and inverts into a cross-

section of a larger unknown identity. As though it were an entrance, the rest of the painting swells up around it. It's hard not to look at it; the pink is luminous and raw and untouchable, a private mythology that leads us to the deep invisible parts of ourselves.

Here are four pieces on rice paper by Agnes Martin. Her work is stripped to the minimum. Material substance is nearly nonexistent. The slightest waver of line creates a forceful vibration and a harmony. The whole is irradiated with light, an acute condensation, the ultimate fusion of line. Martin paints about "the desert whose light is between words and silence and whose images reside in the imagination" (Dore Ashton).

Jim Clark is an abstracter of quintessence. His sculpture is tangible and indefinable, a "luminous silent stasis" (James Joyce). On top of a large stainless steel drum rests a smaller complex webbing of metal. The cumbersome body appears weightless because it is highly polished. The element resting on top of the drum seems as though it grew there; neither part can exist without the other. The piece is forced to surrender its unyielding hardness to the thrust of light that emanates from the webbing.

Larry Deyab's paintings are filled with people in urban life who are symbolic of any place and any time. Apparitions and faces, both familiar and strange, float before you. These extraordinary images somehow end up not being the subject of the paintings. Even so, one is drawn to them and pulled within. Darkness filters from the dense paint of Deyab's Untouchable, in which an old man and a young girl noiselessly appear, bound in the eyes of memory, ultimately not people but presences.

Jan Muller's paintings share a profusion of deep, jewel colors. The polyptych from 1957 is typical of his composite paintings. It expresses a recurrent theme, human debasement. Humor and anger are evident in these paintings of prostrate naked women in forests with approaching equestrians. Muller creates his own complex myths and symbols representing irrational man. Muller's converse, auspicious view is manifest in a still-life called All Living Things*, which is no ordinary still-life. Endlessly floating up in front of the canvas, the flowers and stems rise and glow right out of the painting.

Emily Sorkin 1985
New York City

*Guggenheim Museum, Collection, Thomas Messer