

Adolph Gottlieb exhibition

May 6, 1954

Miss Carolyn Whiting
The Nation
333 Sixth Avenue
New York City

My dear Miss Whiting:

Mr. Lane Faison has given us a copy of his review of the Gottlieb retrospective show, which review is appearing in your issue of Saturday, May 15.

The students here would like to print this review in their college newspaper--in the next issue coming out next week, if that is permissible. May we assume that if we don't hear from you, it will be all right for this review to appear? We will see that recognition is given the Nation if the review is published in the college paper.

Very truly yours

Paul Feeley
Art Faculty

art column

by S. Lane Faison, Jr.

Typed for Mr. Faily 5/5/54
appearing in the (May 15th) 1954 issue of 'The Nation'

It would be difficult to imagine two painters with less in common than Edouard Vuillard (1868-1940) and the very contemporary Adolf Gottlieb. Retrospective exhibitions of both artists are currently available, the first at the Museum of Modern Art (through June 6), the second, selected for Bennington and Williams Colleges by Clement Greenberg, at Williamstown (May 7-23). The Vuillard show, which may be considered definitive, came ~~to~~^{to} New York from Cleveland. The Gottlieb show, which includes nineteen canvases from 1942 through 1952, opened at Bennington. ~~As~~ the first retrospective ~~of~~ ~~organized~~ of the work of this important and established artist, it merits critical attention. We may properly add comment ~~on~~^{about Gottlieb's} the very recent paintings ~~of Gottlieb~~ which were on view during April at the Kootz Gallery.

Vuillard, the poet of intimate interiors in a minor key, occasionally turned muralist and signally failed. Gottlieb is, I think, essentially a mural painter, whatever the ~~scale~~^{size} in which he happens to work. When he essays more intimate effects, the result does not ~~compensate~~^{compensate} in subtlety for what it loses in force. ~~His~~^{his} best work is either very large or conveys the feeling that it would like to be. (as in Gauguin, I have stressed ~~the~~^{the} mural impact of Gottlieb's art several times in this column and can only reiterate ~~the~~ the hope that architects will provide for him the necessary opportunities.

As if in answer to some future challenge ~~and~~^{and} limited only by the sixteen-foot length of his studio, ~~Gottlieb~~^{Gottlieb} painted this year the very powerful Labyrinth which was the central attraction of the ~~Kootz~~^{show at the} Gallery. Some of the ~~smaller~~^{smaller} pictures exhibited there, for example Armature, were more interesting as fragments of a large composition as large as Labyrinth or the twelve-by-seven foot mural Black, White and Pink, than they were ~~as~~^{impressive} as isolated works of art. When the scale

was reduced along with the size, as in The Cadmium Sound, the effect suffered noticeably, and the same result can be seen among the 1952 "landscapes" in the retrospective (the small Forest, with its white lines thinly inscribed in a rather muddy field, as against the bold play of ^{large} ~~red~~ ^{red and black} spots on an oyster-white ground above a horizontal base strongly modulated in grays and blacks, in Sea and Tide. ~~Putting~~ ^{Putting} the two Gottlieb shows together, we may observe that the earliest ~~painting~~ ^{painting}, Pictographic Symbol (1942), announces the bold subdivisions, the strong value contrasts, the forceful use of the dark edge, and the restrained gamut of color that ^remerge so triumphantly in the ~~yellow~~ ^{the} yellows, yellow-oranges, ^{the} blacks and ^{the} whites of Labyrinth. The latest work, however, is much freer. Something of Pollock's calligraphy is incorporated without loss of structure, and something of Pollock's and ~~de~~ ^{de} Kooning's deep space. If I am not greatly mistaken, Labyrinth will take its place as the Léger City of the 1950's. We are led not so much through the fragments of metropolis as through the mind of the modern city-dweller. I do not object to Gottlieb's occasional reference to sound in his titles ^{for} ~~the~~ the roar of traffic and of industry is in Labyrinth and in Unstill Life (1952), the finest of the moderate-sized pictures.

In his earlier work, the best examples strike a note of dark resonance. Recurrent Apparition (1946) plays deep oranges and mustards against a nearly black field, while Equinoctial Rite orchestrates pinks, mustards and blues against a similar ground. I am not strong ^{direct} for the/symbolism of Gottlieb's symbols, framed as they are within the strongly marked subdivisions. I do not believe their power depends on ~~the~~ pictographic communication; in fact I have reason to believe that these fish, these leering eyes and these vaguely erotic faces are symbols mainly in the sense that they have been symbols in various primitive arts. This is a borrowed rather than an invented

content. I do not think ^{3.}for example, that it adds much to the meaning of one of the late states of Rembrandt's large etching, The Three Crosses, to discover that one of the riders is a fifteenth century figure out of Pisanello. ~~This figure~~ ^{It} merely adds a touch of exotism to Rembrandt's unearthly melancholy. The value lies not in the symbol, so to speak, but in its transmutation, and in Gottlieb that is achieved through color and through as nice an adjustment of patterned shapes as in the best of Matisse.

In retrospect, Gottlieb's art seems to oscillate between two extremes: the absolute black-on-buff pattern of Plus, and the ~~very~~ amorphous and ~~very~~ messy swirls of Chromatic Game. Both of these paintings date from 1951 and I do not like either of them. The finer works achieve greater complexity than the first and greater clarity than the second. What is particularly impressive, however, is the way in which Labyrinth encompasses all that has gone before. Some day, when it can be seen in another and larger retros^pective, it will, I think, emerge as a major synthesis in Gottlieb's work. The sequence of pictures in Williamstown lead up to it, and without it one's expectations of an evolving career are not adequately fulfilled.

The Vuillard show will need no successor to tell its subject's story. His was a small, if very refined talent. He painted one kind of picture well and painted it best between ~~17~~ about 1893 and a little short of 1900. In the catalogue Mr. Ritchie bravely attempts to claim more for him, but I cannot escape the feeling that any increase in Vuillard's reputation will come from his graphic work, of which a fair sample is also included. ~~in the current exhibition.~~