
Diary

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OVERNIGHT IN NEW ENGLAND, we have swung from a damp and dreary spring to humid weather. The woods, the gardens and the verges of the roads look lusher than ever — ‘green’s green apogee’, as Wallace Stevens figures it in *Credences of Summer*. Fierceness accompanies the luxuriance, and the combination still takes me aback. Edward Hopper gets it right pictorially, and who can forget the stifling heat of *The Great Gatsby* — the summer novel.

Although the museums continue to broadside their public — Max Beckmann at MOMA’s awkward and ugly temporary premises in Queens, and Kasimir Malevich bringing order to the Guggenheim — summer is not New York’s best season. Usually, the galleries begin to pack up around Memorial Day at the end of May. This year was different. Maybe the cool, wet spring influenced them, for late season shows of quality abounded. One morning in early June, I caught a bunch of them and never stirred out of midtown.

The Isamu Noguchi Museum in Long Island City was closed for repairs or extensions. Instead, they mounted two masterly installations in prominent Manhattan buildings. These did much to enhance Noguchi’s claims as a major twentieth-century sculptor, the equal of, maybe superior to, his contemporaries Henry Moore and Alberto Giacometti.

A recently refurbished and restored Lever House — Gordon Bunshaft and SOM’s masterpiece on Park Avenue — played host for a group of stone carvings in the garden and bronzes in the glass-walled foyer. Although Bunshaft and Noguchi collaborated on a number of projects, they make an odd couple: Noguchi as the apostle of the organic, and Bunshaft as the high priest of the International Style. One of their most elaborate collaborations, the Beinecke Rare Book Library and garden at Yale, is at best impressively chilly. But the stones and the bronzes at Lever House were quite moving, underscoring Bunshaft’s civic humanism. He set his tower block back from the corner and placed it at right angles on a plinth so that air and light flow into the base of the building. The garden, partially hidden from the Avenue, is conceived as a refuge from the street, where the driven can collect their thoughts. Noguchi’s obelisks and tables read like secular steles and altars, objects of contemplation.

Across town in the lobby of the UBS PaineWebber building on Sixth Avenue, early portraits and later figurative carvings were set against a backdrop of his Peking scroll drawings of 1930. Noguchi’s portraits, which began in the 1920s, were his bread-and-butter work. Over the next thirty years, he would produce a hundred and more of them, often in surprising media like cast iron and terracotta, adapting *materiel* to sitter. Collectively, they form the finest group of sculptural portraiture in twentieth-century art. They are a neglected part

of his work. Years ago, I bought for the Wadsworth Atheneum the bronze head of Lincoln Kirstein, when both sculptor and sitter were in their twenties. The price was US\$28,000, with little competition. Nearly twenty years after his death, Noguchi is hardly a neglected figure, but he is often taken for granted. You can miss his originality.

On 57th Street, there was a juxtaposition of two eminent colour painters in danger of becoming the forgotten and the fallen. Jules Olitski, with a large and handsome group of spray paintings from the 1960s, represented the volatility of colour versus the discipline and harmony of colour painting according to Josef Albers just down the block at Pace Gallery.

I went to the Albers show out of a strong sense of duty. Is there a more familiar figure in twentieth-century painting? How many Homages to the Square must a critic see to make up his or her mind? Is he not the artist who expunged originality from his art through repetition? You can become the victim of your prejudices.

The group at Pace was well selected, with a variety of formats and sizes. But it was the colour that surprised, far more adversarial than I had remembered. It gave the paintings a contrariness, even a perverse quality far from the didacticism of the Bauhaus classroom or the pages of the unreadable *Interaction of Colour*. The paintings had been recently cleaned, and you were more aware of the hand-painted quality of the surface, almost seething within the geometric formats.

The Olitski show contained a different revelation. I had always thought of him as the most spontaneous of the colour field painters. His reputation has taken a terrible beating over the years, initially because of his perceived closeness to Clement Greenberg, and lately because of the waywardness of his own production in recent years. For many, the spray paintings constitute his strongest claim to lasting significance. They may have darkened slightly over the past thirty years, but they seem far less gauzy and atmospheric. Now they appear dense, even monumental, conceding nothing to allusion or suggestion, to colour suspended in air. They were adamantly the product of the secular 1960s like Kenneth Noland’s chevrons and stripes or Frank Stella’s protractor paintings. The action and reaction of colour on colour provides the sole subject and affect of the work, carrying the stubborn belief that art is its own reward and needs no support from the world to move us. Why that should sound heretical or reactionary today puzzles me. Enough to delight the most ardent postmodernist heart, these shows have brought about a reversal of fortunes: Olitski has become the impersonal classic, and Albers the artist with the repressed inner life.

It was a good morning in midtown.