

Elmer Bischoff
MATRIX/BERKELEY 55

University Art Museum
Late October - mid-December
1982

#65



Elmer Bischoff exhibited drawings based on the figure at the University Art Museum in 1975. They were among his last works using the model, marking the end of a direction Bischoff had been following for nearly thirty years. In his paintings of the period he had already made the final transition from figuration to abstraction.

Bischoff was associated with the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) during the late forties and early fifties. It was an exciting time at the school. Douglas MacAgy, a man with unusual foresight and enthusiasm, had taken over the directorship in 1945 and had put together a faculty of the most advanced artists in the region. Bischoff's fellow instructors were artists Richard Diebenkorn, Frank Lobdell, Hassel Smith and David Park. Perhaps the most influential teacher was Clyfford Still, a resident of San Francisco for some years yet in close contact with the emerging group of Abstract Expressionist painters in New York. Still's existential ideas and skill at paint manipulation had a profound effect on students and faculty alike. Other strong influences were New York painters Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt, who came to the school to teach summer sessions.

It was in this fertile atmosphere that Bischoff and his contemporaries matured as artists. Their investigations into gestural, expressive abstract painting occurred simultaneously with similar searchings by New York artists, but by the end of the forties, the San Francisco group, led by Park,

began to reintroduce the figure. However, they continued to paint in a brushy, loose manner, developing what was later named the Bay Area Figurative style. Although Bischoff went on to paint colorful, thickly pigmented scenes of figures in interior or landscape settings for nearly two decades, by the early seventies he was, by his own admission, losing interest in the figure as subject matter.

In Bischoff's earliest non-representational paintings the abstract shapes are large, still deriving from figures against a background; gradually, the shapes have become smaller and more fragmented. Typically, Bischoff's newer works contain a multitude of color shapes, lines, squiggles and daubs deployed over a light, brushy field. They have no associative subject matter. Whereas the vivid greens, blues and yellows in #64 might, for example, suggest sunlight on landscape, closer inspection reveals that the shapes are primarily non-organic and the space non-illusionistic. Though the rhythm and relentless activity of certain works might suggest cityscapes (#65) they do so abstractly, in the way that Piet Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie" conveys the tempo of New York City.

A continuing interest in light, color and the material of paint ties the older works to the new. Bischoff acknowledges the influence of Titian, El Greco, Rembrandt, and Goya on his figurative works, but influences on his paintings of the past decade are harder to recognize. Now and then there are allusions to Wassily Kandinsky's

energetic "Improvisations" from the early years of this century as well as momentary references to the paintings by Joan Miro from the twenties and Arshile Gorky's work of the forties. Whereas the large scale, directness of approach, raw color, and lateral organization in a shallow space are elements found in many Abstract Expressionist paintings, the joyous, even raucous mood of Bischoff's works is distant from the angst associated with the New York School. In fact, the humorous quality can be linked in part to Bischoff's longtime admiration for George Herriman's Crazy Kat cartoon strip.

Bischoff's paintings have a distinctive identity. They have never been affected by current trends. When Minimal painting dominated the gallery scene in the early seventies, Bischoff's paintings were action-packed and vibrantly colored. The return of recognizable imagery in current European and American painting is unlikely to deflect Bischoff from his course.

Bischoff was born in 1916 in Berkeley, California, where he still lives and works. He received a B.A. (1938) and M.A. (1939) from UC Berkeley and cites the lasting influences of two teachers in particular, Margaret Peterson and Erle Loran. Bischoff taught at the California School of Fine Arts from 1946 to 1952 and was head of the graduate program there from 1956 to 1963. Since 1963 he has been on the faculty of the Practice of Art Department at UC Berkeley. Bischoff has been actively exhibiting his work since 1947. He has received many prestigious awards, among

them a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1964 and election to the National Academy of Design in 1973. His work is represented in major private and public collections throughout the country.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:
#62, 1981, acrylic on canvas,
84 1/2" x 80".

#63, 1981, acrylic on canvas,
80" x 80".

#64, 1982, acrylic on canvas,
80" x 80".

#65, 1982, acrylic on canvas,
80" x 84".

#66, 1982, acrylic on canvas,
96" x 80".

All works are lent by John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco.

Selected group exhibitions:
The Art Institute of Chicago, Surrealist American Art/Fifty-Eighth Annual Exhibition of American Painting & Sculpture, '47 (cat. pub.); The Oakland Museum, CA, Contemporary Bay Area Figurative Painting, '57 (cat. pub.); Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Between the Fairs: 25 Years of American Art, 1939-64, '64 (cat. pub.); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era, '76 (traveled to National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution Washington, DC; cat. pub.). Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, The Human Form, '80 (cat. pub.).

Selected one-person exhibitions:
California Palace of the Legion of Honor, S.F., '47; Staempfli Gallery, NYC, '60, '62, '64, '69 (cats. pub.); The Oakland Museum, CA, '75 (cat. pub.); University Art Museum, UC Berkeley, '75; John Berggruen Gallery, S.F., '79; Arts Club of Chicago (traveled to Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston), '80 (cats. pub.)

Selected bibliography (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Kramer, Hilton. "Elmer Bischoff and the San Francisco School of Figuratives," Arts (Jan. '60).

Plagens, Peter. Sunshine Muse (NY: Praeger, '74).

Perrone, Jeff. "Reviews," Artforum (Summer, '75).

Stiles, Knute. "San Francisco: Elmer Bischoff at John Berggruen," Art in America (Sept. '79).

Curtis, Cathy. "Elmer Bischoff: Ties to the Landscape," Artweek (May 5, '79).