

Eberhard Bosslet

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A Penchant for the Past

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At the John Gibson Gallery, Eberhard Bosslet, who is German, continues to make eccentric abstract sculptures out of old filing cabinets, enlisting a sense of the past that is less Romantic and more about neglect, anonymity and, maybe, clerical labor. Finally, the past that interests Alan Johnston, a painter from Scotland whose work can be seen at the Jack Tilton Gallery is located rather exclusively within the history of 20th century abstraction, so much so that his art seems as much of the 1930's or 1950's as the 1980's.

Different as they are, these exhibitions raise some important questions about how the past figures into esthetic experience, especially into the understanding, acceptance and evaluation of new art. All new art builds on the past in some way, incorporating specific ideas from other art or from history in general. Deciphering this building process is part of art's pleasure and, often, part of its content.

It may be that the greatest art perpetually balances between old and new, familiar and unknown. Paintings like Picasso's „Demoiselles d'Avignon“ or Jasper Johns's „Flag“ have long stood on this fine line, spectacularly summing up earlier achievements while also pointing toward future ones.

However, this balance is rare, especially today. This is a decade that can seem to be bracketed by Neo-Expressionist painting's various revivals and post-modernism's astute, often cynical recyclings (supposedly proof positive that originality and invention are no longer possible). These developments aren't in themselves bad, yet more and more we are confronted with some blurry blend of the recycled and the revived, with art that seems overly dependent on what has come before, that exploits rather than builds on a connection to the past. This is a problem that plagues the work discussed here and that prompts it to be grouped together, at least momentarily.

The past evoked by Mr. Bosslet's sculptures – which can be seen, along with his abstract paintings, at the John Gibson Gallery (568 Broadway, at Prince Street) through Oct. 8 – is largely an industrial, nonesthetic one. Using old filing cabinets as bases, Mr. Bosslet straps their drawers together, forming mysterious structures that hover halfway between the abstract and the functional.

These objects execute a kind of reverse seduction: once part of the labor force, they speak of (and have been released from) years of drudgery, gaining a certain dignity from their agedness and ordinariness. Nonetheless, one does feel seduced and even more so in front of Mr. Bosslet's industrial-strength paintings. Made by scraping layers of paint off of sheets of galvanized metal, their geometric configurations are reminiscent of the 30's rug designs of Eileen Gray.

Mr. Bosslet's work, like the other art discussed here and much else that can be seen in New York these days, calls to mind Barnett Newman's famous admonition to „make it new.“ Neo-Expressionism and post-modernism notwithstanding, this is the challenge that remains.