

M A T E R I A L
F I C T I O N S

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Vikky Alexander
Alan Belcher
Jennifer Bolande
Jack Goldstein
General Idea
Ken Lum

France Morin, guest curator
organized by 49th Parallel Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art

University Art Gallery
State University of New York at Binghamton, Binghamton, New York

Foreword

For the past several years, the Anderson Center has annually sponsored an interdisciplinary program exploring arts and culture which involves cooperative programming of several University departments. This year's program, **Canada in Focus**, brings together visual and performing artists, poetry and fiction writers, films, lectures, and a conference on U.S.-Canada trade relations.

This rich display of Canadian arts commences with the opening of **Material Fictions**, an exhibition organized by France Morin, director of the 49th Parallel Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art. 49th Parallel is dedicated to providing greater visibility for major Canadian talents both in their New York City gallery and in communities throughout the United States.

The Anderson Center and the University Art Gallery are pleased to collaborate with France Morin and 49th Parallel in the presentation of contemporary Canadian art.

My thanks to Nancy Gonchar for facilitating the organization of the exhibition and catalogue and to Michael O'Kane for his expert installation of the artworks.

Robert F. Melville,
Managing Director, Anderson Center for the Arts

Introduction

This exhibition of recent work by younger Canadian artists assembles, under a single theme, a diverse selection of artistic voices which all utilize the prosaic materials of mass media and mass production. Through the use of mediums and procedures such as industrial format photography, plastic, artificial wood veneer, sign paint, and air brush, to name only a few, these artists comment on both the materials themselves as well as their general use in popular culture.

Owing to their emergence from a Canadian cultural context, with all that it implies, we would expect to see a difference in their work from that of their counterparts in other countries. But, do we detect here a national sensibility or an international language?

It must be stated from the outset that this body of work is not especially typical of the larger Canadian scene, which itself is very complex. Just as in the United States, two schools of thought have emerged among Canadian scholars: one, a revisionist approach in which Canadian art is examined within an international context, and the other, a more nationalistic treatment with an emphasis on specificity (more strictly speaking, what is "Canadian" in Canadian art). Ronald Jones, a contemporary of the artists in this exhibition and a well-known New York critic, was invited to comment on the exhibition.

France Morin
Director, 49th Parallel

Cool Canadians

For six years the 49th Parallel, Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art has been the New York site for the introduction and promotion of recent Canadian art. It is a point of reception for a contemporary national culture at a time when cultural difference is becoming more difficult to discern. As sovereign and provincial politics, economics, and cultures become more and more diffused, even difficult to believe in, the 49th Parallel becomes increasingly instrumental in gauging the dimension of cultural latitudes, and not just for Canadians.

The claim that a culture is also a national culture has always been reactionary to the extent that it properly means cultural self-determination. It is an expression that arises by recognizing cultural differences. In the most desperate instances, it has meant the preservation of a culture. There have been those occasions over time when the sincere desire for artistic self-reliance has been the rescue of a culture at the moment it would have slipped from view. There have also been instances where the slightest change in temperature has transformed self-reliance into something dogmatic, over-determined, and blindly zealous. The question as to whether cultural differences can persist into the last quarter of this century radiates from the 49th Parallel and circulates through Material Fictions.

A bit of art history bears repeating. There have been some frightening instances when national cultures have been used as instruments of exclu-

sion. Paul Ludwig Troot's *The House of German Art* in Munich serves as an example of how the desire for an autonomous culture and fierce nationalism can masquerade bleak authoritarianism as benevolent cultural caretaking. Troot's vision for architecture was meaningful to Adolf Hitler for its use of classicism as the symbol for cultural longevity and purity. Hitler's admiration for Troot's architectural historicism was an expression of his own commitment to fabricate a past that would justify the present and insure a certain future. The reverse of that would be Futurism. Originally, the Italian Futurists were convinced that their potential lay in the sacrifice of their past. In the end, however, their nationalist fervor blinded them to the staggering perversity of serving Mussolini's vision of Italy's modern destiny.

More recently, Donald Kuspit grappled with the effacement of Germany's cultural past and a description of its renewal in paintings by artists like Georg Baselitz, Rainer Fetting, and Salome. In his 1983 essay "Flak from the 'Radicals:' The American Case Against Current German Painting," Kuspit wrote about these artists: "There is no norm of—or guidelines for—'being German' today. Not being normative, they can signal a new German possibility. Thus to see these pictures is to be confronted with the special necessity and special freedom of the Germanic today." From Kuspit's point of view, the appearance of a new German art that harkened back to artists like Emil Nolde, Max Beckman, and Erich

Heckel signaled the occasion when contemporary German artists had been given the freedom, and thus the obligation, to renew Germanic culture.

One explanation for neo-expressionism is that certain contemporary German artists assumed a reactionary posture in the fitful attempt to recover their cultural heritage plowed under by the campaign of Americanization initiated by the Marshall Plan. As sympathetic as one might be to their desire to recover their culture, in the end it has to be admitted that they failed. Expecting to transcend the effects of Americanization and stake out the dimensions of a new Germanic art, they found themselves managed by a global culture unsympathetic to those things nationalistic.

In a way that corresponds to Kuspit's search for the renewed identity of German art, Michael Brenson has tried to settle on the definitive details of American art. Writing about the Morris Louis retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Brenson observed: "One enduring but also problematical achievement of Formalism, of which Louis is a seminal figure, was the ability to define a particularly American art. What makes this problematical is that any art that is particularly American is going to promote the American dream."² Like Kuspit, Brenson is infatuated with the idea of uncovering the essential definition of a national culture.

Were we to take Brenson's American Dream theory to heart, then we could expect that the instructions "Remove all works of art from the

Museum of Modern Art that are examples of Formalism and simultaneously promotions of the American Dream" would be sufficiently clear for someone to make reasonable judgments about which works of art would remain in the museum. The bias that even allows such a directive to be imagined, which could center the meaning of such instructions and initiate the search for things definitive, would never be more than hopelessly sentimental, were it not quietly seeping with a contempt for culture at large.

These thoughts are set forth to provide a useful backdrop for *Material Fictions*, because it is as though this exhibition is a test site for Canada's contemporary culture. On the face of it, it would appear that an exhibition of eight Canadian artists organized by France Morin, the director of the 49th Parallel, could not help but define something about Canadian art that might correspond to Brenson's American Dream theory or Kuspit's view of what it means to be a contemporary German. Is this an occasion to discover something definitive about Canadian art? While this exhibition is undoubtedly grounded in Canadian culture, what is there about these works that would compel one to call this art Canadian?

These works of art, varied and complex, at first divert our attention from questions of national cultures. That *Material Fictions* is about the fakery of contemporary reality, that it is il-

luminated by Jean Baudrillard's notion of "hyperreality,"³ is the appropriate tropism. But to leave it at that ignores the larger question of what "hyperreality" has done to national cultures. In 1939 Clement Greenberg observed the universalizing effects of kitsch. He wrote: "Another mass product of Western industrialism, it [kitsch] has gone on a triumphal tour of the world, crowding out and defacing native cultures in one colonial country after another, so that it is now by way of becoming a universal culture, the first universal culture ever beheld."⁴ Perhaps Baudrillard's "hyperreality" was the result Greenberg feared, as he wrote about the swarming of kitsch. As it turns out, "hyperreality"—the loss of cultural difference—has ruthlessly distilled nationalism. If Greenberg noted an early version of it half a century ago, and Baudrillard has accessed its lasting results, then Material Fictions may be viewed as the confirmation that "hyperreality" is the *solution* to national cultures. That each attempt to define a national culture, or even a national style, by this exhibition proves unsatisfying and unconvincing is precisely at the heart of the matter.

This art, these artists are the critical respondents to their time. Theirs is the conscience that infiltrates the cultural conglomerate that began ushering out national identities before they, themselves, were born. Discreetly, they have positioned themselves just beyond the difference Baudrillard describes between implosive and explosive systems.⁵ Provincial cultures,

cultures that are supposedly defined by a national identity, or even tribal customs, are implosive according to Baudrillard: "Not expansive or centrifugal configurations, but centripetal ones: singular pluralities never directed toward the universal, but centered about a cyclic process—ritual—and tending to "involve" in a nonrepresentative, unauthoritarian process; without any disjunctive polarity, yet without caving in on themselves, either."⁶ With Baudrillard's ideas at hand, Michael Brenson's American Dream theory can be viewed as the carefully managed implosion of a style cradling a vision for life in America. So extremely delicate, it can withstand neither contradiction nor interference without inviting catastrophic results. The inverse of this is an explosive culture which Baudrillard has described in this way: "... our 'modern' civilizations have existed on a base of expansion and exploitation at all levels, under the sign of universalised commerce, of economic and philosophical investments, under the sign of universal law and conquest."⁷

The artists in this exhibition have carefully regarded our erratic drifts, as we live through the final spasmodic gestures of an explosive culture. It is fair to say that from a very close range they critically reflect on the fulminating effects wrought by "modern" civilization. Not at all visionaries, but using profound judgment, these artists detail the ominous circumstances of our culture and compel each of us to imagine a fate that by now seems nearly irreversible. It is the

fate of experience totalized: *ultra*-consolidation. These artists picture the ways difference has been smoothed over, sacrificed to the universal, to warn against its horrible consequences. And on this occasion, gathered by the 49th Parallel, they force the hand of the withering credibility of national cultures to betray it as symptomatic of the loss of difference at large.

Ernst Mandel, the economist, has described this evening out of experience as a highly advanced stage of capitalism, a multinational capitalism, that distills difference to offer a finite set of standardized products to a global market. Mandel wrote: "Late capitalism constitutes generalized universal industrialization for the first time in history. Mechanization, standardization, over-specialization and parcellization of labour, which in the past determined only the realm of commodity production in actual industry, now penetrate into all sectors of social life."⁸ Mandel and others concur that late capitalism's best interests are served by consolidating power through the centralization and the normalization of the economic, the social, the political, and the artistic.⁹

At the same time, it is important for late capitalist culture to maintain the objective appearance that cultural heterogeneity exists and continues to be respected. "I'd Like To Buy the World a Coke," Disney's "It's a Small World," and the "Band-Aid" concerts were all successful

campaigns carefully orchestrated within three different settings—global commerce, the entertainment world, and international charity—in order to convey the impression that "the parts are greater than the whole." In the face of all of this, it seems that to continue to rehearse the idea that Canadian culture, or any other modern culture or national style, is unique unto itself, is willingly to serve the long-term interests of the late capitalist program surreptitiously to intensify its own centralized authority, while simulating the free play of culture and imagination.

The artists in this exhibition center us within a culture to which Canadians can have no exclusive claim. In the end, it is precisely because these artists are incapable of expressing something "uniquely Canadian" that tells us more about the state of Canadian culture than if they could.¹⁰ Jack Goldstein's luminous paintings and General Idea's coy play on the self-validating presentation of commerce and competition picture the way late modern culture structures experience. Ken Lum and Vikky Alexander's art convey the fast surface of contemporary life that "reads" without having to be read. Alan Belcher carefully, deliberately, and relentlessly over-packages to over-extend the commodity. His art is the stunning relic, the standardized container that is empty beyond belief. We recognize it all; this art seems so user-friendly. That we will warm up to its familiar appearance whether we are in Toronto, New York, Paris, or Johannesburg is, of course, its warning. Jennifer Bolande's art

exists on another frequency, but once translated, imparts a related message. Her constructions and sculptures are highly eccentric expressions of a personal ultimatum directed at our culture: either relax the frenzied pace of cultural apprehension or lose forever those things discrete, those feelings deeply personal, those vast emotional reservoirs which are invested within her art.

These artists know that we are beyond the point when one could take *cultural heritage* seriously. To do so at this point would be willfully decadent. Canadian culture, as something distinct, is cool, not hot. Along with every futile search for those things definitive, it has fallen in with late modern culture where things are still and chilly, entombed by a tragic loss of difference.

Ronald Jones
New York City

1. Donald Kuspit, "The American Case Against Current German Painting," *Expressions*, (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1983): 46.

2. Michael Brenson, "Art: Morris Louis Show," *The New York Times*, October 10, 1986.

3. See Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983).

4. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961): 12.

5. See Jean Baudrillard's *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, "Implosive Systems, Explosive Systems," p. 58.

6. Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983): 59.

7. Baudrillard, pp. 59-60.

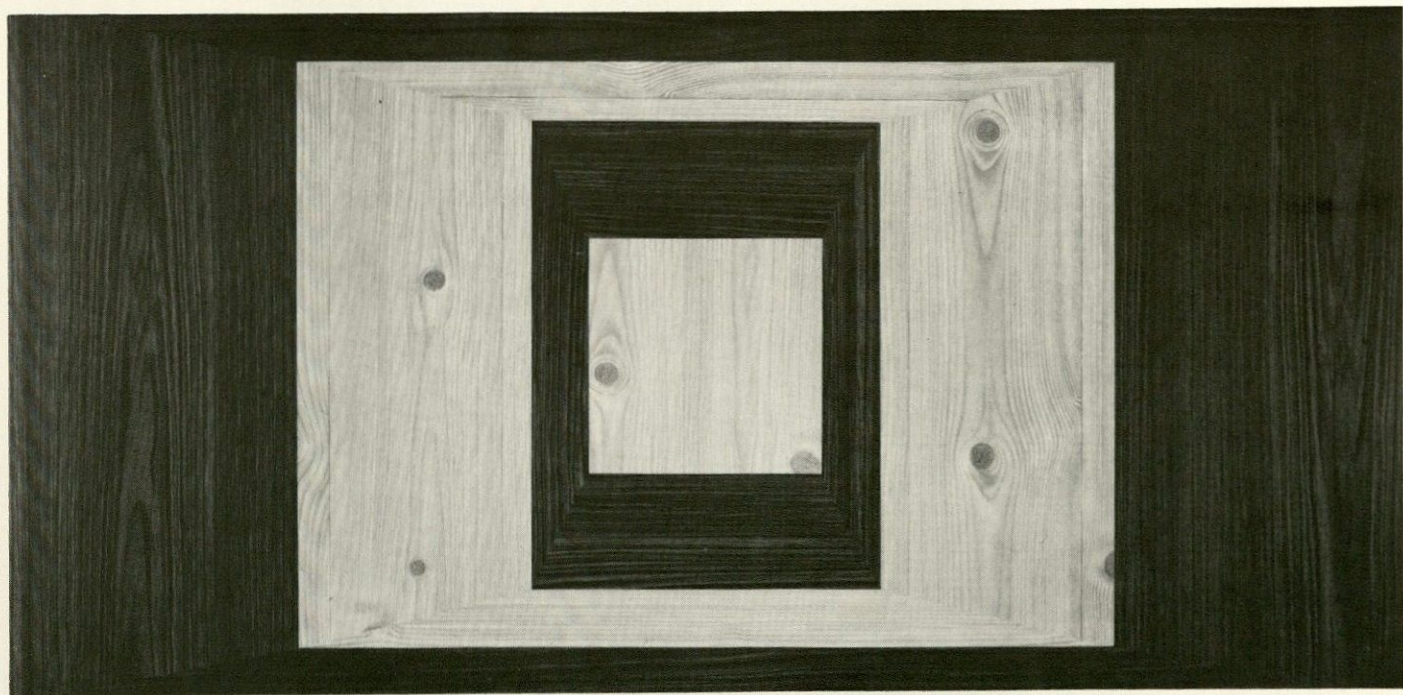
8. Ernst Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris De Bres (London: New Left Books, 1978): 387.

9. For example, when Baudrillard writes about explosive systems: "... according to a process of boom and acceleration, this explosive process has become uncontrollable, it has acquired a fatal speed or amplitude, or rather, it has reached the limits of the universal, it has saturated the field of possible expansion and, just as primitive societies were ravaged by explosion for not knowing how to curb the implosive process any longer, so our culture begins to be ravaged by implosion for not having known how to curb and equilibrate the explosive process," he corroborates the same universalization which Mandel associates with late capitalism. Within the intersection of ideas created by Mandel and Baudrillard would naturally be Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's thoughts from "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment As Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

10. Even when a distinctly Canadian view of the world comes through, it is necessarily mediated by the context of a global vantage. One of the most stirring examples of this was Garry Neill Kennedy's exhibition, *Figure Paintings*, at the 49th Parallel in December of 1984. Kennedy literally portrayed how Canadian political and military interests were being absorbed by a program of universal militarization directed against Canada and Mexico by the United States.

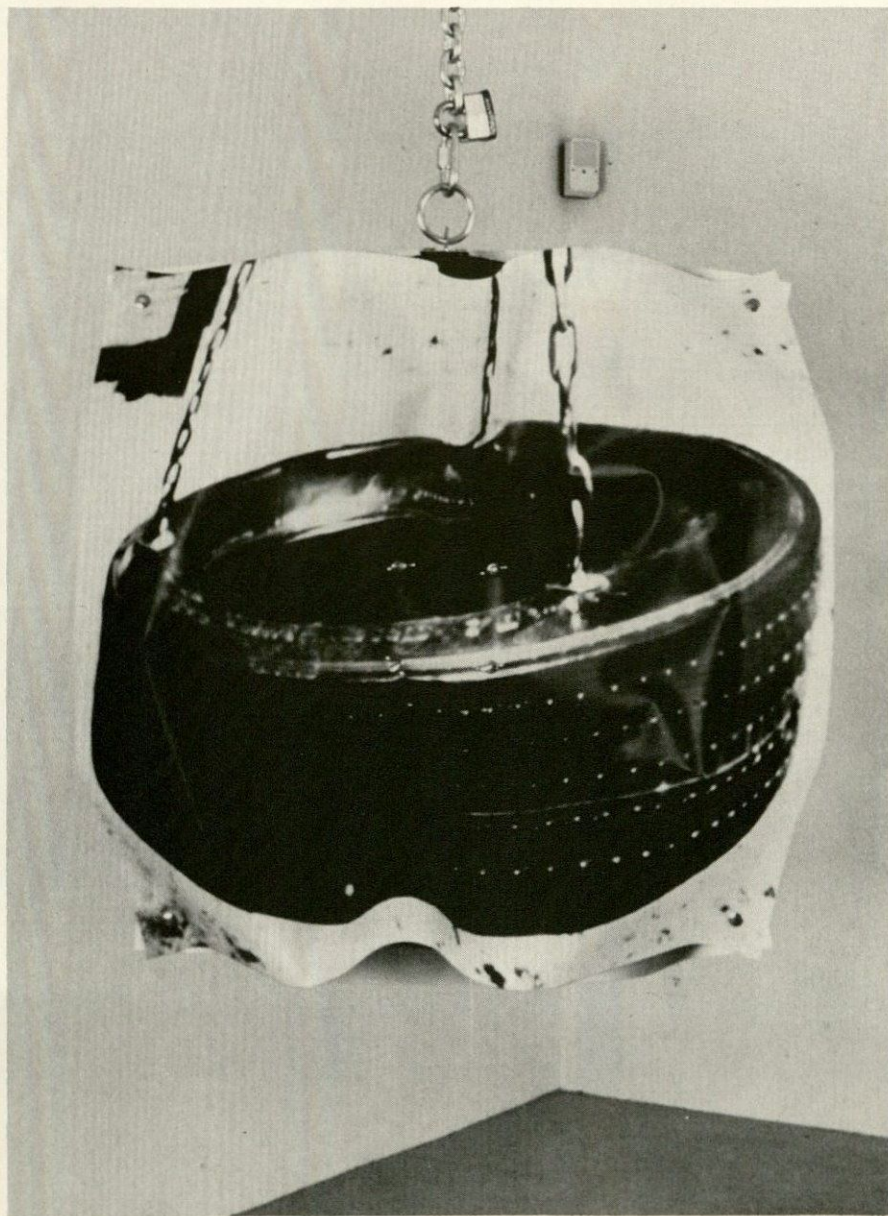
Vikky Alexander was born in Victoria, B.C., in 1959. She moved to New York City in 1979, following periods of study at the Ontario College of Art, Toronto (1976) and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax (BFA 1979). The recipient of three Canada Council awards, Ms. Alexander has served as visiting artist at a number of institutions, most recently the Rhode Island School of Design and the Banff Centre for the Arts. Her work has been exhibited throughout North America and Europe. She is represented by the Milford Gallery in New York.

Vikky Alexander, *January 30, 1987*, 1987, masonite and contact paper, 2 x 4 feet.



Alan Belcher, an artist working primarily in photo-sculpture, was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1957. His work has been exhibited throughout the United States and Europe since 1981. A former owner and co-founder of the New York-based gallery Nature Morte, Mr. Belcher now resides in Toronto. He is represented by the Josh Baer Gallery in New York.

Alan Belcher, *Park—2*, 1987, color photographs on canvas, tire and chain, 35 x 35 x 16 inches.



Jennifer Bolande was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1957. She received her art education at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax (1975-1979). In 1979 she moved to New York City. In addition to her work in sculpture and photography, she is also active as a writer, contributing to such journals as *Real Life Magazine* and *LAICA Journal*. She is represented in New York by Nature Morte.

Jennifer Bolande

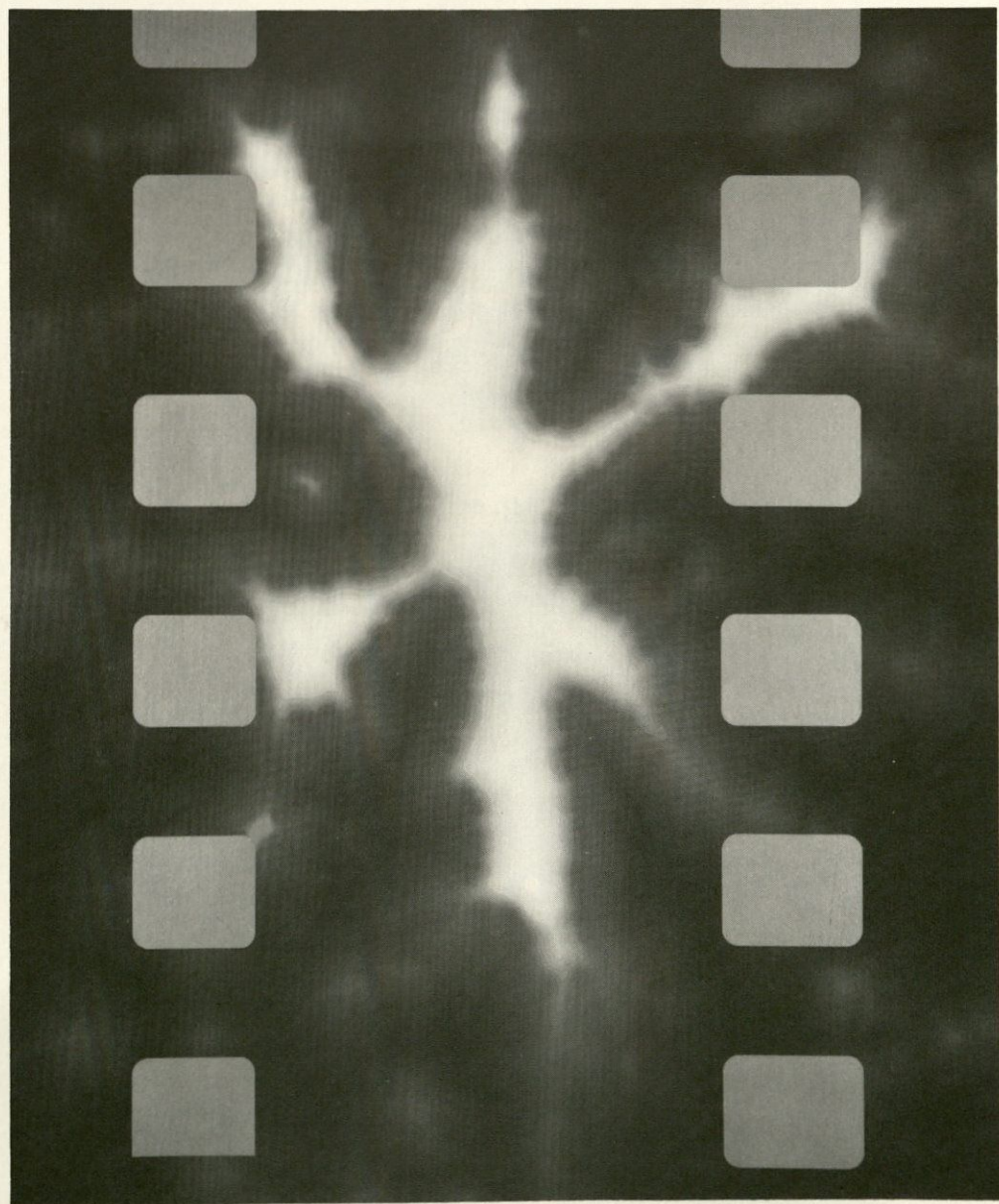
(left) *Stunt Artists #1*, 1985, black and white photograph framed with mallet, 50 x 55 inches.

(right) *Central and Mountain*, 1985, chalk pastel on drum, 2 feet diameter.



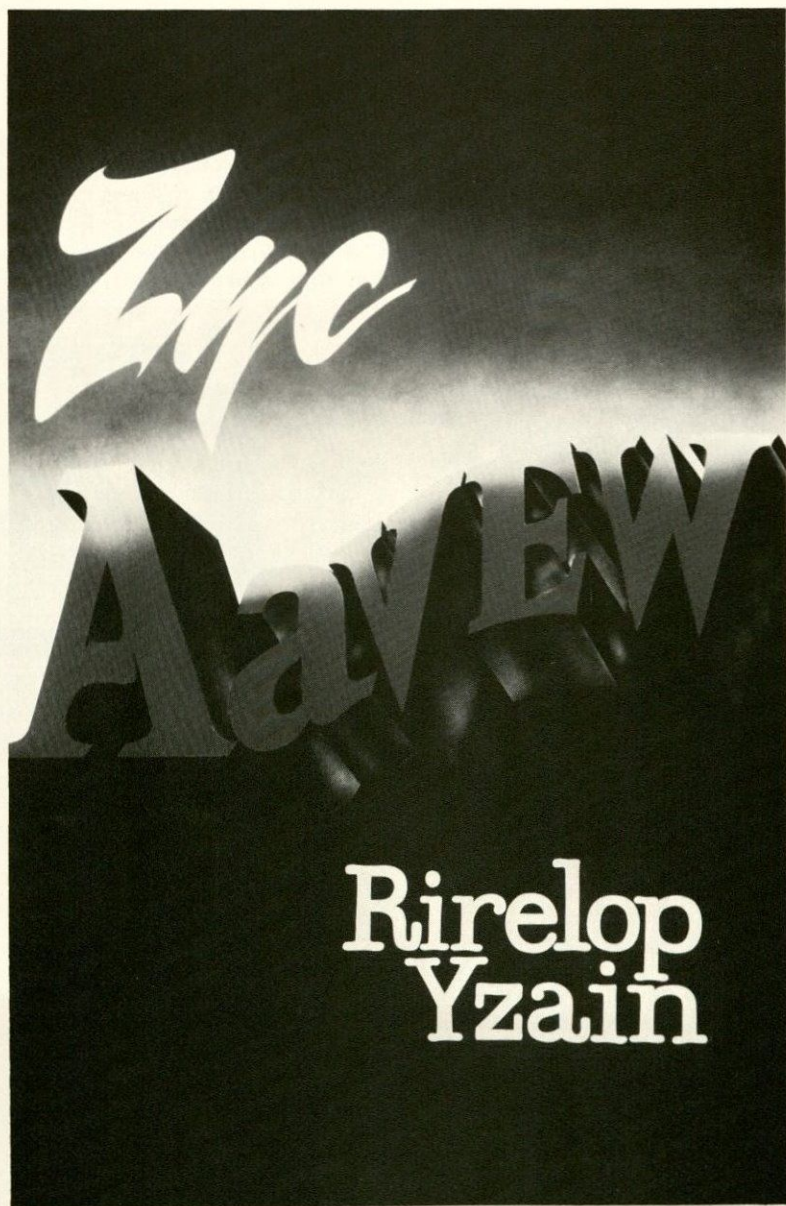
Jack Goldstein, a native of Montreal, Quebec, was educated at the Chinouard Art Institute in Los Angeles (BFA 1970) and at the California Institute of Arts in Valencia (MFA 1972). Since that time, he has been active in a wide range of media, including film, performance, music, and painting. His work has been exhibited at major art galleries and museums throughout the United States and Europe. He currently lives in New York, where he is represented by the John Weber Gallery.

Jack Goldstein, *Untitled*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 7 x 6 feet x 6 inches.



Ken Lum was born in Vancouver, B.C. in 1956. He became active as an artist around 1977. Since that time, his work has been exhibited extensively throughout Canada, the United States, and Europe. The recipient of an MFA from the University of British Columbia in 1985, he currently divides his time between Vancouver and Toronto. He is represented in Canada by the Ydessa Gallery, Toronto, in New York by Nature Morte, and in Chicago by the Robbin Lockett Gallery.

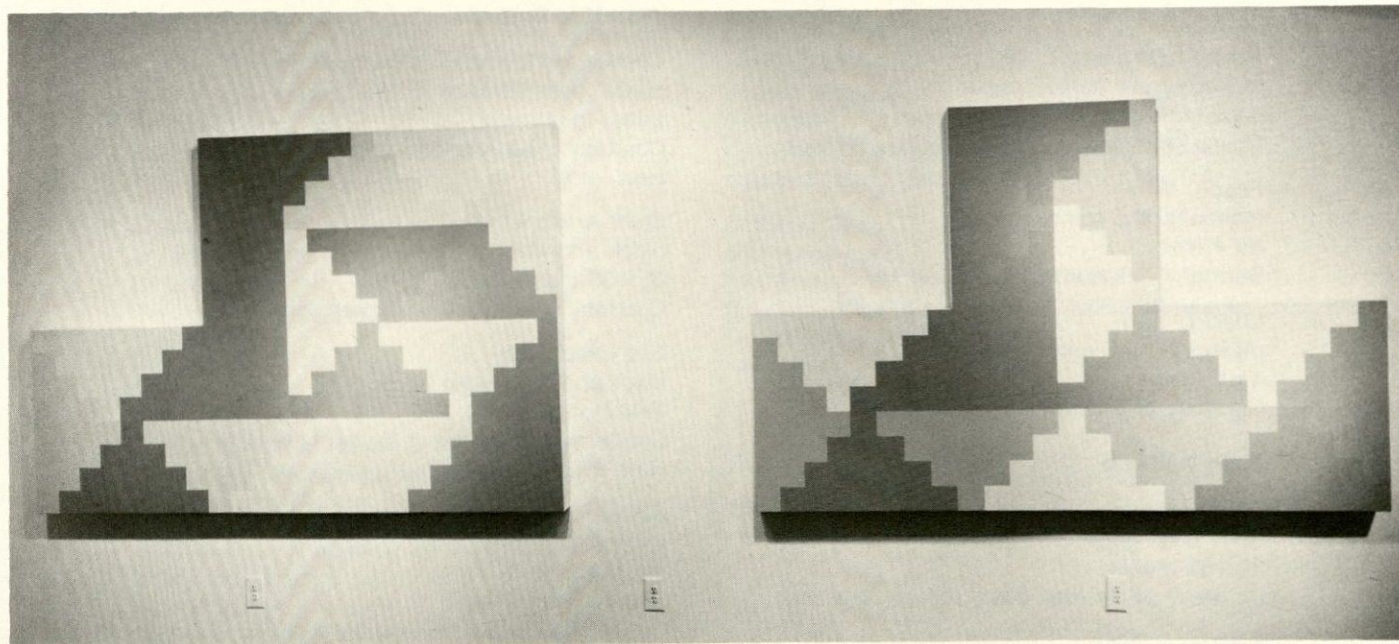
Ken Lum, *Untitled*, 1987, enamel on wood,
4 x 6 feet.



General Idea was formed in 1968 by three Toronto-based artists. The group works collectively in a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, installation, video, and performance. They are represented in Toronto by the Carmen Lamanna Gallery and in New York by International with Monument.

General Idea, *Shaped Ziggurat Painting #1 & #2*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 63 × 94 inches, 63 × 63 inches.

Abstract Works



Exhibited Works

Vikky Alexander

Modern Ornament I, 1987
masonite and contact paper
4 × 2 feet
Courtesy of Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago

Fence, 1987
masonite and contact paper
4 × 4 feet
Courtesy of Milford Gallery, New York

Court I, 1987
masonite and contact paper
4 × 8 feet
Courtesy of Milford Gallery, New York

Alan Belcher

New Freedom — 84, 1987
color photograph on masonite
32 × 59 inches
Courtesy of the Josh Baer Gallery, New York

Park — 2, 1987
color photographs on canvas, tire and chain
35 × 35 × 16 inches
Courtesy of the Josh Baer Gallery, New York

Canadian Soft Woods, 1987
color photographs, nails and wood
variable sizes from 6 × 6 × 6 to 12 × 9 × 9 inches
Courtesy of the Josh Baer Gallery, New York

Jennifer Bolande

Central and Mountain, 1985
chalk pastel on drum
2 feet in diameter
Courtesy of de Jong and Byron Collection,
New York

Stunt Artists #1, 1985
black and white photograph framed with mallet
50 × 55 inches
Courtesy of Nature Morte, New York

Sad Face, 1985
color photographs on wood
19 × 21 × 1 inches
Courtesy of Collection of Daniel Levine,
New York

Sampler, 1987
trampoline, thread, color photograph
on masonite
36 × 48 × 16 inches
Courtesy of Nature Morte, New York

Jack Goldstein

Untitled, 1987
acrylic on canvas
7 × 6 feet × 6 inches
Courtesy of the John Weber Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1987
acrylic on canvas
7 × 9 feet × 6 inches
Courtesy of the John Weber Gallery, New York

General Idea

Shaped Ziggurat Painting #1, 1986

acrylic on canvas

63×94 inches

Courtesy of International with Monument,
New York

Shaped Ziggurat Painting #2, 1986

acrylic on canvas

63×63 inches

Courtesy of International with Monument,
New York

Shaped Ziggurat Painting #3, 1986

acrylic on canvas

63×94 inches

Courtesy of International with Monument,
New York

Shaped Ziggurat Painting #4, 1986

acrylic on canvas

63×94 inches

Courtesy of International with Monument,
New York

Shaped Ziggurat Painting #4, 1986

acrylic on canvas

63×94 inches

Courtesy of International with Monument,
New York

Shaped Ziggurat Painting #5, 1986

acrylic on canvas

63×94 inches

Courtesy of International with Monument,
New York

Ken Lum

Untitled, 1987

enamel on wood

4×6 feet

Courtesy of the Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago;
collection of Ed Bates, Chicago

Untitled, 1987

enamel on wood

7×7 feet

Courtesy of the Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago;
collection of Christian Leigh,
New York

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