

The Modern Museum's fifteen:

Where U.S. extremes meet

ARTNEWS, APRIL, 1952

The extremists, the forward-pushing, exploring artist and the one whose vision is set in a long, backward-looking gaze, are conventionally opposites in art. Their prototypes are Delacroix, erroneously but commonly considered as the man who kept beating down the doors to the future, and Ingres, equally erroneously accepted as the disciplinarian reactionary, the disdainer of innovation. Actually, however, if "modern" is to imply an "extremism of advance," then Ingres is the more modern, with sponsorship from such different quarters as Picasso and Arshile Gorky. Yet it is possible that the very idea and position of extremism, in the old sense, no longer exists—a possibility that is suggested by the exhibition opening this month at the Museum of Modern Art of fifteen American painters and sculptors.

In modern politics, extremes are blunted by coalescence, the Left and Right alliances which characterize history since the 'thirties. In art they are blunted by rapid and total acceptance; not by society, naturally, which is so distant from today's extremist that its opinions make no difference, but by the fairly large, fairly informed audience at which the artists probably sighted to begin with. So although the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition could be considered an investigation or partial presentation of some extremes, its timing misses by a few years, or months (or minutes, if one considers the pace of museum schedules). The edge is gone, the start, shock, jolt, turn of surprise, instant of disorientation or whatever gave edge and bite have vanished. We say: "Yes, Jackson Pollock . . . and it's about time he got here, too." Many of the others have already made their own way, set their pace, established their stature: Rothko (who is represented by an important

group of new, unexhibited works), Tomlin, Lippold, Baziotes, Ferber (whose sculpture here, the decoration for a synagogue in Millburn, N. J., will be the subject of an extended article in a forthcoming issue). Now they widen their public, which is pleasant. And they fill in some gaps in the Museum's record of exhibitors, which is understandable.

But if we decide to accept many of these works as extremist, we must change the term to suggest acceptability, even popularity, and still leave it extending in the realms of pure individualism and uniqueness of expression that can, paradoxically, become anonymous. And we must change an implication, for extremes suggest distances, polarities (like the Romantic-Classical "feud") which no longer seem applicable.

Two exceptions to the above are two of the most astonishing artists represented at the Museum of Modern Art, Edwin Dickinson and Frederick Kiesler. Both are discussed in the article on the following pages of this issue.

Two of the most interesting cases for the above are Herman

Two moderns see New York

Herman Rose [left] of Brooklyn, veteran but generally unappreciated painter, sees *Twenty-third Street El* (lent by J. H. Hirshhorn) from a nearby rooftop. Herbert Katzman [right], young newcomer sponsored by the Downtown Gallery, found a sweeping design in *Brooklyn Bridge*. Both paintings are in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of fifteen Americans—each of whom is presented in a small one man show.



Rose and Clyfford Still—painters whose achievements have been relatively unappreciated and whose inclusion among the fifteen Americans is a cause for congratulation.

One of the more astute theorists of the advancing extremists—those who demand something that will look new and whose search at the outer edges of modern perception involves an enthusiastic jettisoning and breaking of past paraphernalia—is Barnett B. Newman. He has dismissed "quality" as a "fetish," and denied that "art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it." "The image we produce," he wrote, "is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history."

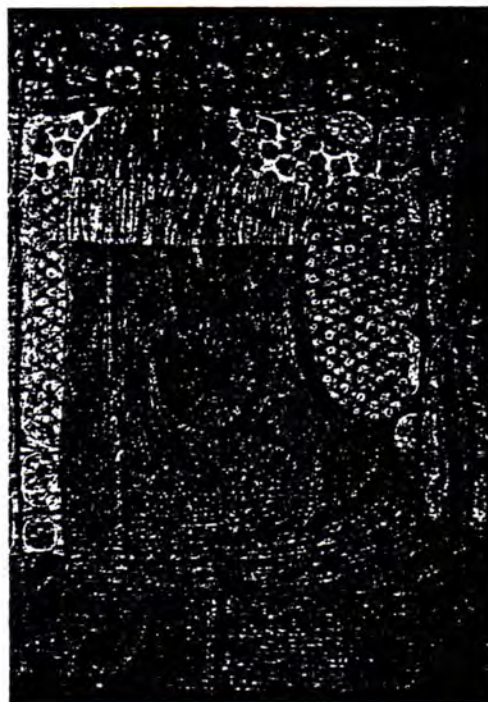
Does this extreme separate Mr. Newman, and the painters associated with him, including Rothko and Still, from what expectedly would be considered the opposite extreme, such as the intimate, small, dreamy and exactly realist city scenes of Herman Rose?

Rose works with infinite patience, literally. He searches the rooftops of Manhattan and Brooklyn—the last private places for the artist who wants to capture public scenes—for the view and the look that stops him and which he recognizes as the finished image. Then he must commute to the site from his home in Brooklyn. Working on one area of the canvas at a time, bringing it to completion, then moving on to an adjacent one, he gets the painting to open as the petals of a bud will open into the full shape of a flower. His method is one of

little strokes and dabs of minutely regulated tones, building the oily pigment up into a relief of bumps and pats. This gives his pictures an Impressionist look that is as superficial as a family resemblance, for Rose admits Pissarro is his father, but father and son are very different, even though you recognize one in the other. Rose's scenes are not impressions; they have a timeless look. His skyscrapers or little Brooklyn gardens might have been built before Columbus by some prophetic Pueblo tribes. The shadowless light that soaks them is unrelated to the clock or the calendar. And the dialogue is not between the painter and his subject, or the painter and his painting, but the energy is made to flow between the picture and the site—two realities outside the artist. The revelation is the discovery of the landscape—the object—and it is slowly and patiently transferred and preserved on the painting.

This is a backward extremism. The artist pushes quite consciously to his extremely individual position, but he insists on the validity of various historical devices. It is not being traditional, which in the best sense involves building on the past in some sort of continuum of action and reaction, and in the worst sense a kind of thoughtless, face-value appreciation. Nor is it being eclectic, or scavenging for new ideas about old styles. It is not reactionary painting, viz. literary; nor retardataire, viz. eccentric. It is an idea about painting that has been pushed to the extreme where the artist gives himself up to the sensation of the subject—and in this sense Rose's method might be called anonymous. It is relevant to mention here that one of his favorite

The Dance by Herbert Katzman, who made his New York debut last year in one of the Museum of Modern Art's "New Talent" shows.



Female Head by Joseph Glasco of New York, youngest of the 15 Americans at the Modern Museum. He was born in Oklahoma in 1925.

One of a series of untitled charcoal drawings by Edward Corbett of Taos, N.M. He the most interesting newcomer in the show.





Clyfford Still's 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ feet high untitled abstraction (lent by Alfonso Ossorio) is typical of his energetic style that has had a wide following on the West Coast.

modern painters is Josef Albers, not only because his forms are "all of one piece" or because "he is in control"—two of Rose's given reasons, but perhaps also because Albers insists on his anonymous place as director of the drama between the painting and the object.

But Albers' object also includes the idea.

In the pictures of Clyfford Still, the object is almost all idea.

Where Rose's paintings are apt to be small (they must be carried to and from the landscape), Still's are apt to be huge.

Rose uses the softest sable brushes; Still gave up using brushes some years ago—"I had gotten too much virtuosity"—and paints with long, slashing, sliding strokes of the palette knife. Rose is a "tonal" painter; Still is not interested in painting as it is a profession with such subdivisions. Rose paints a detailed picture of reality; Still's paintings contain no elements of nature, and the only possible tie between his image and the spectator's visual associations is the long, horizonless, "egocentric" plains of the Midwest and West where Still [Continued on page 65]

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gettable. Bear said he always walked in the shadow of Bear the friend, mentor and counsel of other artists. Perhaps now his energetic calligraphic pictures will receive recognition. Once explaining why he didn't do more for himself as an artist, Bear explained to a young painter he had launched:

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grew up. Still has jettisoned almost all the historical appurtenances. The cliché-acceptance of the aesthetics of modern painting in its role of heir to the Renaissance, he finds dull at best, irritating at worst. This artist is engaged in writing his autobiography, and because he is a "natural" painter, he does it with paint on canvas. But the autobiography—which is a chain of thoughts and meditations on sensations—is primary. He follows Horace's advice, and breaks with tradition by inventing a consistent story. Still likes big paintings because he feels that in this scale a sense of intimacy and immediacy is established between the painter and the picture; between the onlooker and the picture (an idea he shares with Rothko). But aside from this aim at immediacy, Still's judgments are often negative—certain elements will not be permitted to obtrude, inconsistent elements that come from the past or the accepted present and thus bear the "impurities" of stereotypes. Still may reject any established method as being incapable of acting as a vehicle for his *per se* newness.

Then why should anyone look at Still's paintings?
 "Why, indeed," he might reply . . . and anyway, he doubts if one can ever see them correctly, as a related series, a product of long growth. Most shows are but fortuitous ensembles, dictated by gallery space and by what happens to look well, he feels.

Still's attitude and opinions seem immediately acceptable as logical extensions of the right of an artist to exist. And his paintings also seem immediately acceptable as art, despite the artist's logical denials of the relevance of such acceptance. His tawny, fatty and lean colors, surfaced like soot and grease, seem ripped into jagged bays and spurs. Something appears to have been flayed alive, skin and sinew pulled out to expose layers of rough-legged matter. A large red area will invade a yellow one, the knife building up rods and shelves of paint along the way, with strange mounds and scars appearing in unexpected areas. Colors meet and are separated as the knife pushes them together, making transitions which should answer any critic of Still's technical abilities.

One painting is almost black, with only a few streaks of red and blue. There is an immediacy and depth of impact here which is astonishing. Another, smaller, is yellow with a

few spots flecked like opals showing through. Some are almost white, with white on bare canvas. Others have intricate, interlocking forms which express complex physical exertions.

Many of the artists taking this contemporary extreme of advance have arrived at a calm, graceful exhibition of taste which can be called feminine, if one expunges the derogatory implications this adjective has when applied to American males. There is a sense of poise, rest, refinement and poetry. Edward Corbett, the most interesting new artist in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, taught with Still in San Francisco for a while, and though his soft, gently smudged charcoal drawings do not resemble Still's work, they may be considered as men of the same extreme. Corbett's statement in the catalogue is simply: "I intend my works as poetry." Still is unique in that he has evolved a masculine, dramatic, pounding expression within the strict confines that his interest has set.

Are Rose and Still at extremes from each other? Is there, in fact, any metaphysical distance between them?

Both have searched for and found an individual expression while denying the validity of "originality" as a follower of Picasso's would appreciate that distinction. Both have highly original handlings of paint, and have made paintings that could almost be classed as reliefs as the light plays over the elaborate surfaces. Still dismisses this as a mere manifestation of energy—"something that comes and goes and does not really make much difference." Rose consciously studies his relief effects and integrates them, "like setting diamonds," with his facets of hue. But more important seems their similar view of the role of the painter as a mediator between painting and idea—an idea of a landscape and its reality and significance; or an idea of a sensation or response to meditation expressed with appropriate methods and intuition on the canvas' plane.

The search for beauty and the fetish of quality are immaterial to both. Rose says "frankly I'm in love with my subject," so beauty is of no particular importance to him. And although Rose would probably fight for quality, and Still dismiss it, both have so individual a method that the common "fine-artists'-type-quality" has been expelled from their paintings.

Thus extremism as separate ex-

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tremes is perhaps just a lingering myth perpetuated by the avant-garde in order to assert its avantness; a fetish to which to cling in our period when a "new" idea gets digested in about fifteen minutes.

What has been written about Still and Rose could apply to several of the other painters in the exhibition. And there is little need to discuss again in these pages the notable contributions of Pollock, Lippold, Rothko, Tomlin, etc. However, one must add that some of them (as well as some artists still very incompletely exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art—like DeKooning, Franz Kline, George Cavallon) cannot be called extremists, for they work with, while drastically changing and reinterpreting tradition—which historically is the position of the great artist.

As for the newcomers in the show, they are, on the whole, disappointing, perhaps because of the high level of company they have been asked to keep. Corbett, as already noted, is an exception, but Rothko, Still and Tomlin must quite overwhelm his sober works, which look like sinister abstractions by Odilon Redon miraculously resurrected and living in our hot, dry Southwest.

Joseph Glasco is the youngest exhibitor (born in Oklahoma in 1925). He has been seen in three New York shows, and has demonstrated considerable talent. His huge, doughy personages—of paint that looks somehow as if it had been knitted together—have a blunt and witty presence. Glasco likes soft, shifting tones and elaborations of texture that are a bit postery for the intensity he seems to strive for, but the

impact often comes through.

Herbert Katzman, born in Chicago in 1923, is a slapdash Expressionist in the Kokoschka manner, but he can work his views of Europe or New York so fast and ingeniously that they achieve a simple integration. A few shapes, two triangles and two ovals, for instance, are covered by deep but contrasty earth colors, and black outlines add drawing on top. Here speed and poise of execution, with the final picture brought to perfect balance, is somehow reminiscent of Raoul Dufy—despite all Katzman's show of violence.

Irving Kriesberg (also born in Chicago, in 1919) reminds one of Paris, too, but of the younger generation that has been combining their masters into new cocktails. He uses Bonnard's colors, especially the purples-to-reds and greens; Matisse's frontal arrangements (and his dancers) and Kriesberg's own ideas about sheep and birds. The results are pleasant, like so much of the modern Ecole de Paris, with violence of color justified (sometimes to the point of negation) by the verve and good humor of the linear drawing.

Thomas Wilfred, veteran experimenter, shows his "Lumia" compositions of colored lights that drift like planned sunsets across a screen. His researches (in the opinion of this reviewer) have little to do with art, but they may have a lot to do with comfortable living and enjoyable watching. Wilfred's works show no sign of changing their appeal which has placed them among the most popular and widely demanded exhibits ever seen at the Museum of Modern Art.

Dickinson and Kiesler continued from page 23

fraction of an inch, here he whips out huge, elaborately twisted forms in a day with a band-saw. Devoted to this machine, which he finds "a real discovery," he insists on utilizing it for even the most delicate details. Uncannily anticipating his final forms, he laminates thin, flat pieces of wood together to achieve apparently impossible curves, or fits groups of irregularly shaped segments together to arrive at flat planes. These mechanical ingenuities, evident only on close examination, offer another important level on which to experience this work.

The weighty cross-bar of the base and the heavy rope looped eloquently over one of the joints were both inspired by the theme of his original Totem. The Totem—simultaneously a Christian and a Pagan religious symbol, the artist suggests—was based on the principle of a primitive fire-making device, a wooden cross with a rope attached. But a motif in Kiesler's work often jumps from one medium to another. Thus, the version preceding this *Galaxy* was made as part of his 1948 stage production for Milhaud's *Le Pauvre Maelot*, and the version following it is the *Galaxy* of paintings.

Rising on the wall a foot higher than the sculpture, the grouping of

outdoors) appears in the uppermost units which together form a rough square like that of the lintels. Powerful strokes of ochre enamel skip from picture to picture in the asymmetrical cross that follows the plan of the base. And four vertical strips, the only parallel units in both *Galaxies*, become the piers. Broadly painted, with a sensuality and light-heartedness he never learned from De Stijl, this *Galaxy*—exhibiting a new principle, offering a new direction—is undeniably a revolutionary step in modern painting.

Offering nothing palpably new but his own unique talent, Edwin Dickinson, in terms of his awareness of the artistic climate about him, paints with as square a spirit of rebellion as does Kiesler. The rebellion, as manifested in his art, is directed against the rabid rejection—which is the moral basis of much avant-garde art—of a whole area of past tradition. Dickinson stubbornly resists this pressure to reject, and continues to put anything into his painting that occurs to him, ruling out no technical possibilities, directly utilizing whole levels of non-painting experience. But his refusal to make his art on the basis of a pre-decided concept puts him in the position of following a path that

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