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while establishing that coherence or avoidance of incoherence where
(with the exception of a few paintings by Monet) it had never before
been located. The result is something like a new world of color: as
though the separateness or apartness that characterizes the relations
among individual colors in the early horizontal band paintings now
also characterizes Noland’s use of “white” color generally.

Notes

1. On the notions of the autonomy and multiplicity of colors, see respectively
the section on Jules Olitski in the introduction to Three American Painters
(reprinted in this book as “Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski,
Frank Stella” ) and the discussion of Louis’s stripes in “Morris Louis” (reprinted
in this book).—M.E. 1966

Caro’s Abstractness

Orangerie (1969–70; fig. 45), one of the most ravishing sculptures Anthony Caro has ever made, is also one of the
most nearly pictorial. Unlike most of his pieces it appears to comprise
a number of discrete and rather highly characterized shapes, whose
mutual juxtaposition, while not actually establishing a single plane
or a succession of planes, seems nevertheless to imply the kind of
planarity we associate with painting. (It’s right that Matisse has
been mentioned in connection with Caro’s recent work. The affinity
between Orangerie and the work of Morris Louis—for example, the
Alph painted of 1960—might also be noted.) And yet how unpictorial
Orangerie finally is. The chief rounded shapes delineate them-
selves above all by twisting in space. Its seeming planarity is in the
end decisively subverted by the angling and arcing—the rapid,
curved-versus-straight cursiveness in depth—both of individual ele-
ments and of the ground plan as a whole. Most important, Orangerie
must be seen in relation to Caro’s table sculptures, which he has been
making more or less steadily since the summer of 1966 (figs. 49–55),
and as a step beyond the superb Trefoil (1968; fig. 44), in which he
first physically included the plane of the table in a sculpture that
stands on the ground.

Briefly, the ambition behind the table sculptures was to make
small works that could not be seen merely as reduced versions of
larger ones—sculptures whose smallness was to be secured abstractly,
made part of their essence, instead of remaining simply a literal,
quantitative fact about them. That ambition led Caro, first, to incor-
porate handles of various kinds in most of his early table sculptures, in an attempt to key the scale of each piece to that of graspable, manipulable objects (partial precedents for this include Picasso’s Class of Absinthe and a few sculptures by Giacometti); and second, to run or set at least one element in every piece below the level of the tabletop on which the sculpture was to be placed, thereby precluding its transposition, in fact or in imagination, to the ground. It at once turned out that by tabling, or precluding grounding, the sculptures in this way Caro was able to establish their smallness in terms that proved virtually independent of actual size. That is, the distinction between tabling and grounding, because determined (or acknowledged) by the sculptures themselves instead of merely imposed upon them by their eventual placement, made itself felt as equivalent to a qualitative rather than a quantitative difference in scale. (Not only has the abstract smallness of Caro’s table sculptures proved compatible with surprising largeness of actual size; it soon became apparent that a certain minimum size was required for their tabling to be experienced in those terms.) In these and other respects Caro’s table sculptures mark the emergence of a sense of scale for which there is no preceident in earlier sculpture and no clear parallel in our experience of the world. The incorporation in Truffol of a table, or tabletop, may be seen as merging largeness and smallness as both had come to be defined in and by Caro’s art. And in Orangerie Caro has extended and refined the implications of such a merging of abstract scales by raising the already thin and narrow tabular plane almost to eye level and by angling a second plane into it from the front, which together largely attenuate its ostensible normativity. The result is altogether more delicate and less obviously tablelike (more shell-like?) than in Truffol. But once again it is to the tabular plane even more than to the ground that the other elements chiefly relate.

The exploitation of different levels, basic to Caro’s abstract sculptures from the first, is also crucial to the other indisputably major work on view at the Emmerich Gallery last May, Deep North (1969–70; fig. 46). In that sculpture a rectangular piece of heavy grid is suspended parallel to the ground at a height of about eight feet in a way that allows, but does not compel, the beholder to position himself beneath it. This may appear to break with what has been one of the fundamental norms of Caro’s art: the refusal to allow the beholder to enter a given work, to step or stand inside it. That refusal has been striking both because of the general openness of Caro’s sculptures and because of the manifest preoccupation of certain pieces (I do not say of Caro himself) with experiences such as entering, going through, being enclosed, looking out from within, and so on, which one might have thought would virtually have entailed a kind of environmentalism. Moreover, the obduracy of Caro’s sculptures on this score has been only one aspect, albeit an important one, of their antiliteral, antisuatial character; and that has been an index at once of their radical abstractness and of their deep antagonism to the theatrical in all its current forms and manifestations. So that by allowing us actually stand beneath a portion of itself, Deep North may appear to call into question, perhaps even to renounce, what has been until now the essence of Caro’s art.

But the facts of experience do not bear this out. Even when we place ourselves directly below the massive grid, we do not feel that we have entered or are inside the sculpture. Partly this has to do with the nature of something overhead: if we were compelled to step over or across some sort of boundary, however low or slight, the sensation of entering would, I think, become inescapable—though once again the exact basis of this in our experience of the world remains obscure. Partially too it is a function of the way in which every element in the piece seems to twist, turn, face, point, or open away from every other. And partly it stems from the fact that Deep North’s vital center, from which the sculpture as a whole is felt to originate, is located far from the grid and its supports, at the ground level juncture of the three other principal elements, and that our view from beneath the grid both of that juncture and of the relations among those elements (in particular the inspired rhymes among them), if not actually privileged, is at any rate profoundly satisfying. We are of course aware of not seeing all of the sculpture—specifically, of not seeing the grid itself—when standing beneath the latter. But this is experienced as nothing more than a special instance of the limitations inherent in any point of view. In this respect Deep North belongs with After Summer (1969), which partly because of its great size conspicuously resists being seen in its entirety from any single position. None of this is to deny that an apprehension of the grid as overhead, as a kind of roof or ceiling under which we can stand, dominates our experience of the sculpture as a whole. What must be insisted upon is that this is true whether or not we choose to station ourselves beneath the grid: it is a function not of any literal or architectural relationship between structure and beholder, but of the internal relations (or syntax) of the sculpture alone, relations which, however, are deeply grounded in the nature and potentialities of the human body.
The large yellow Sun Feast (1969–70; fig. 47) may be more complex and at bottom more difficult of access than either Orange or Deep North. There are, in any case, at least three types of order at work in it. First, that of Caro’s table sculptures and their subsumption in pieces like Trefoil and Orange. The long horizontal plank that runs almost the full length of the sculpture serves as the “table” on top of which various elements are placed and off of which these and other elements depend or spring or otherwise make their way. Second, the play of elements along and against a dominant axis or track, also identified with the long horizontal plank. This organizing principle appeared in Caro’s work as early as the great Midday, a piece that has much in common with Sun Feast. And third, a kind of sensuous, disheveled, almost certainly “feminine” though not quite figural sprawl, as if the sculpture were displacing itself for its own declamation. The combination of intellectual rigor and intense sensuality again recalls Matisse. But it is also wholly characteristic of Caro’s Blakean imagination. If Sun Feast has a fault, and it may not, it is perhaps too much reliance on the curvilinear, which tips the balance toward an almost rococo elegance and in effect disguises the sculpture’s underlyng difficulty—the difficulty, for example, of the coexistence of several modes of order, no one of which is entirely satisfying, or of the contrast between the thickness of most of the piece and the unnerving thinness of the twisting, plowsharelike elements disposed along the horizontal plank.

Wending Back (1969–70; fig. 48) is the smallest and in obvious respects the least ambitious of the sculptures discussed here. But it could not be better and ought to be recognized for what it is, a small masterpiece. No less inert, more energized, in abstract terms more kinetic sculpture can be imagined. It is as though Caro constructed Wending Back directly out of brief but articulate segments of trajectories, vectors, torques. Everything sweeps, scoops, slices, and is sliced. Even the triangular shape of the largest element seems the result of three shearing arcs whose full dimensions we can only guess. And in general Wending Back implies magnitudes of energy and extension that far exceed its physical limits. Perhaps because of this, the stabilizing, grounding normativeness of the narrow rectangular element that stands on edge is vital to its success. The dark gray color, too, resists the dematerialization implicit in Wending Back’s kinetic syntax, and by so doing further collects the sculpture as a whole while making the abstract nature of its energies all the more self-evident.

Problems of Polychromy:
New Sculptures by Michael Bolus

Two of the three recent sculptures by Michael Bolus on view at London’s Waddington Gallery engage with problems of color and, in particular of polychromy, the use of more than one color in a single piece. The issue of polychromy for modern abstract sculpture might have been raised by the work of David Smith but wasn’t, probably because both choice and application of color remained throughout his career the least resolved and therefore the least generally significant features of his art. Polychromy as a general concern became felt during the 1960s, mainly in response to Caro’s early steel pieces, which demonstrated as never before the potential, as well as something of the difficulty, of color as a resource for sculpture. Within the past several years Olitski’s adaptation of the sprayed color of his paintings to sculptural ends has produced works of great strength and originality. In England, where Caro’s influence has been enormous, problems of polychromy have taxed two of the best sculptors of their generation, Bolus and Tim Scott. (Of course, other sculptors of various nationalities have used two or more colors in a single piece. But only Bolus and Scott, along with Olitski, seem to me to have carried color other than where Caro took it in Sculpture Seven and Month of May.)

Specifically, Bolus’s polychrome sculptures, such as the untitled pieces at Waddington’s (both 1971), exploit, and in the process make perspicuous for the first time, what appears to be a deep, as it were natural affinity between applied color and planarity—between single colors and single planes (fig. 58). It is as if, under condi-