

PROBLEMS OF POLYCHROMY: NEW SCULPTURES BY MICHAEL BOLUS

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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 least generally significant features of his art. Polychromy as a general concern became felt during the sixties, 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. While in England, where Caro's influence has been enormous, problems of polychromy have tasked 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' polychrome sculptures such as the two untitled pieces at Waddington's 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. It is as if, under conditions of sculptural abstraction, a single plane emerges as the strongest, most direct, naturally most convincing bearer or vehicle of a single applied color; or as if a single applied color turns out to declare a single plane more strongly, directly or convincingly than it is able to declare anything else. (As if indeed applied colors cannot be said to *declare* other things so much as merely to help distinguish them from yet other things or kinds of things.) The affinity between applied color and planarity has its source in the phenomenologically absolute relationship, which I have previously claimed is central to problems of color in sculpture,* between applied color and surface as such — a flat plane being in effect the sheerest, most straightforward, altogether most powerful statement of surface that lies to hand. Both Olitski and Scott come to grips with, and in different ways strive to overcome, the limitations for polychrome sculpture implicit in this situation: Olitski by seeking to free applied color from planarity through spraying, that is, by projecting the non-planar surfaces of his sculptures

as convincing vehicles of an everywhere modulating continuum of pulverized color; and Scott, whose entire undertaking expresses a primary involvement with materiality, by freeing color from surface, or at any rate from appliedness, through the use of materials — sheets of colored perspex — in which color literally inheres. (Nothing like this sort of concern with issues of surface can be found in the work of either Smith or Caro.) Bolus on the other hand accepts those limitations from the start. Hence the severely restricted, it may even seem anti-sculptural, vocabulary of form with which in his colored pieces he is prepared to work. And hence also the apparent conventionality of his use of color in comparison with Olitski's or Scott's. For Bolus, the making of polychrome sculptures simply means the juxtaposing of planes, or rather of plane *surfaces*, each of which is identified with the applied color it bears. But the depth of that identification in his work — the sheer conviction it is made to compel — is something new in sculpture.

Our conviction stems in the first place from the internal consistency of the limitations themselves, which at a glance comes across as anything but accidental, mechanical or merely conventional. And it is further, more importantly compelled by specific acknowledgments not just of the appliedness of the individual colors but of the relationship between applied color and plane surface that I have tried to characterize. For example, Bolus' decision to place different colors on opposite faces of the same planar element — contrasted with, and given emphasis by, the use of the same color on parallel faces of different elements — promotes the recognition that the planar elements are far less important in their own right, as physical entities of a particular type, than as carriers of surface and color. Similarly, his decision to leave a thin margin of raw aluminum down the middle of the edges of each planar element underscores the discontinuity between opposing faces of that element and between the applied colors they bear. Even more strikingly, the cutting of narrow slots into those elements along their angled bends at once signals the importance in this context of an abrupt change of plane and stresses, by throwing into relief, the continuity of color and surface across that change. The character of the spray-painted surfaces, which somehow inflect an almost machine-like uniformity with what can only be described as a warm, personal, above all *deliberate* modality of feeling, contributes to our sense of radical identification of plane surface and applied color. And in general an impeccable craftsmanship seems throughout to have been at the service of an intense will to achieve the strongest possible

expression of that identification. In any case, the disparity between the pieces in question as they are and as they would be in the absence of color is fundamental. Our experience of each — especially of the larger, more ambitious, finally more successful of the two — is *essentially* an experience of colored surfaces and of their subtly calculated interaction as seen from different, or changing, points of view. This amounts, I suggest, to a profoundly sculptural conception of applied color, one that goes a long way towards compensating for the restrictedness of Bolus' vocabulary of physical form. The weakest aspect of both sculptures is however not that restrictedness but something else, a conventionality of structure — of the way in which the planar elements are stood or poised — which almost painfully belies the ultimate originality of their color. Moreover, the contrast in the larger of the two pieces between the painted elements the juxtaposition of whose surfaces is the point of the work and the unpainted ones whose function is chiefly supportive conveys a sense of makeshift that is not offset by the frankness of the distinction. These are not quite minor troubles and neither sculpture is more than a partial success.

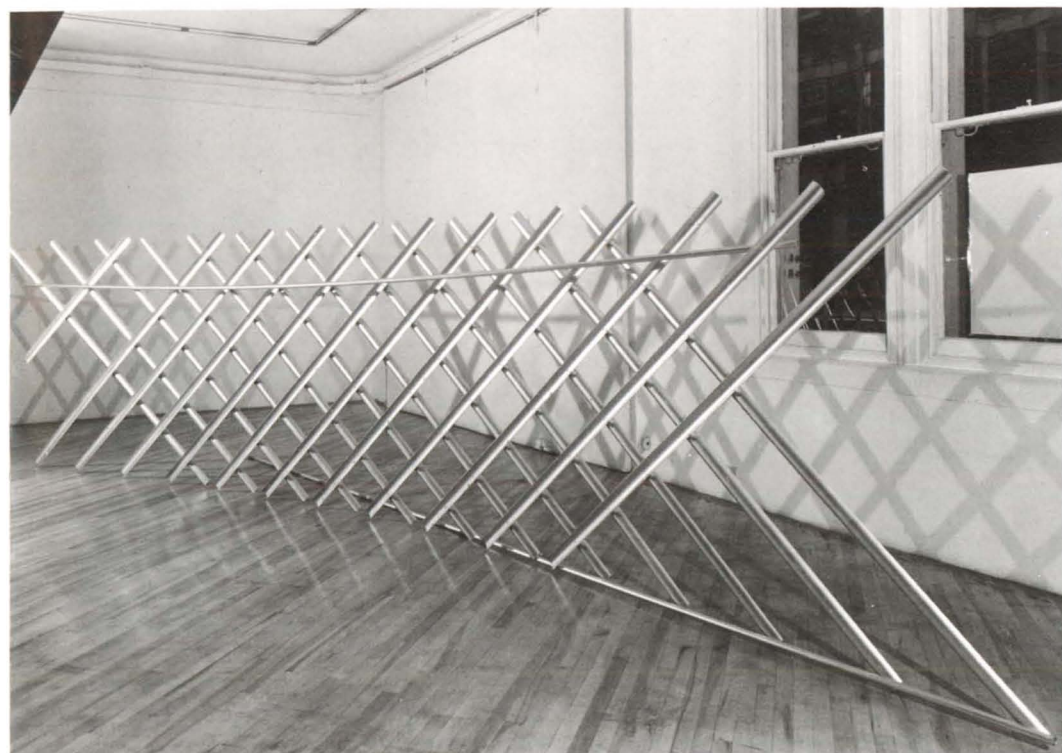
The third sculpture on view consists of a long, gently curving lattice made out of semi-tubular elements riveted together back to back (concave sides facing outwards), intersected at different heights and from opposite sides by two long thin tubes or poles — the entire work painted a uniform aluminum and so circumventing the problems of color discussed above. The basic idea seems to be that of a fence or barrier, more than twenty feet long and five and a half feet high, which on the one hand divides in two any space in which it is placed and on the other contrives a heightened access to all of itself, and by implication to the spatial realms it differentiates, from either side. Our experience is one of separation or spatial division and at the same time of an abstract *transparence*, not just to eyesight but to feeling, that is a function of far more than the interstices in the lattice. The distinction of Bolus' sensibility is evident throughout the piece — for example, in the quiet play of oppositions (between straight and curved, front and back, left and right, riveting and interlacing, etc.) and in the use of gaps in the lattice as cadences at both ends. What remains in doubt, I feel, is whether the sculpture as a whole is physical enough to secure a convincing sculptural identity or whether it is finally too unassertive and attenuated to establish itself other than as a kind of shimmering mirage. ■

*In part of "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings," *Artforum*, Vol. V, No. 3, November, 1966, pp. 25-27. See also part of "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, Vol. V, No. 10, Summer, 1967, pp. 20-21.



Michael Bolus, *Untitled*, painted aluminum, 8' x 11'4'', 1971.

Michael Bolus, *Untitled*, painted aluminum, 8' x 4'2'', 1971.



Michael Bolus, *Untitled*, painted aluminum and steel, 5'7'' x 23', 1971.

