HALLWALLS

EMBLEMS AND PAINT

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Christopher Knowles

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Special recognition must be extended to G. Roger Denson, the exhibition curator. He has created a sensitive and compelling exhibition under adverse conditions. His understanding and interpretation of the works by: Don Hazlitt, Christopher Knowles, Lois Lane and Janis Provisor has provided the public greater insight into the way contemporary artists use signs, symbols, totems and numerous visual keys as vehicles of self expression.

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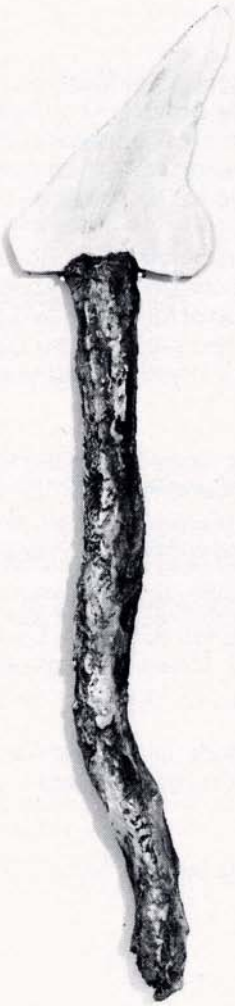
William J. Currie
Director



Don Hazlitt
Torch, 1980
Wood, modeling paste, papier maché, oil, enamel
27" x 6" x 1½

An individual's world view is a uniquely personal synthesis of his experiences, systems and values. Yet, as living coordinates in a cultural and structural scheme, we must recognize that we are influenced by a multitude of factors, only a fragment of which can be both distilled and deciphered. This scheme, no matter how spontaneous or how rigidly fixed in nature, leaves room for both the premise of external determination and that of self-determined choice. It is this latter premise, itself a subject of philosophical defense for centuries, upon which the rationale for art has been presupposed.

To be free is to accept what is so, professes Spinoza; and so the controversy will rage over issues of passive acceptance versus activism, and the lofty pursuit of what is so. But what is most relevant to this essay, and to the work of Don Hazlitt, Christopher Knowles, Lois Lane and Janis Provisor, is the insight to which Spinoza was privilege: that everything we hear, think, feel, believe and do, in short, our entire world view, is entirely subject to conditions and structures over which we have little or no control. This is a philosophy formulated nearly three hundred years before those of Freud, Jung, Piaget, Levi-Strauss or Chomsky, all modernists who have hypothesized some variation of this thought.

It becomes apparent then that every view, subjective or objective, personal or collective, is based entirely upon our own parameters as homo sapiens, and that all data, perceptual or conceptual in nature, is restricted to that which the human perceptual and conceptual systems are able to assimilate. But within this structural universe there exists a limitless variety of possibilities. Their random occurence provide the human imagination with a fertile store of suggestions. In this light, human experience and, hence, art must be seen as relative variables in a larger context. I think that all of the work in this exhibition will need to be seen from this great a conceptual depth-of-field if a thorough understanding of its implications is to be sought. Being of an idiosyncratic nature, there is no limitation to the wealth of its diversity.

This work is in no sense purely formalistic in nature. When formalism does exist in emblematic art, it usually functions as no more than a tangent to its physical properties.

DON HAZLITT

There are artists who play the role of cultural high priests and priestesses in their reverent stances toward formulating a world view and in the distillation of this view through their art. Then there are those artists who engage in both endeavors while assuming the archetypal role of mercurial prankster. Don Hazlitt is an artist who positions himself at some imaginative co-ordinate between the two.

Of all the work represented in this exhibition, Hazlitt's is probably the lightest in mood, a fact he might be the first to admit to. This does not, however, undermine the seriousness of his work, especially when it doesn't take one long to observe that his

work also exhibits possibly the greatest wealth of personalized motifs to be seen in a long time. His forms are invested with a highly personal significance: sometimes reflective of his past; his dreams; of his desires; or of his annoyances.

Forever elusive and equivocal, Hazlitt's work is an expression of his own ambivalence toward the audience he both welcomes and averts. He maintains that he is presenting us with a handle on his own peculiar psyche, but it is a handle which can at any time pop off in our hand. It is just as surprising when it does happen, as when it doesn't; for sometimes the sincerity of Hazlitt's object/image demonstrates a spiritual intent. Many of his constructions evoke fetishes, the objects of totemic worship.

Hazlitt is at other times almost malicious in his "deceptive" use of materials. He will hide glass or nails in emblems which upon first glance invite the viewer to become intimate with and, consequently, to touch the objects before them. He denies having loaded any of his work with intentionally inimical meaning, yet at the same time he will admit that there is no limit to those subconscious investments which he may have made. Who knows whether some psychically hostile vestige not of Homo sapiens, but of Pithicanthropus or Plesianthropus, might not remain within Hazlitt's nervous system?

On the whole, however, Hazlitt's work is not overly menacing. In fact it is much more toy-like in its metaphoric mischief than hostile. Although one might never be entirely enamoured of the work since it isn't elegant or lush (qualities of "beauty" which Hazlitt professes to admire in art), it does have a decorative sensuality which allows one to easily respond to its enticement and, consequently, to become intimate with it: that is, with the external form. One rarely becomes intimate with the hermetic meaning of its intent.

No matter how familiar the basic form, the significance of Hazlitt's work remains obscure. Even the veteran art view is held off at a safe distance from the assocations of each work. Is a blade-shaped emblem meant to signify a palm leaf or a knife? Is a row of triangles a forest, a saw blade or a school of sharks? Is a grey, irregular, curvilinear form a rock, a cloud or a peanut?

Hazlitt is the trickster of this group. He is an admirer of Richard Tuttle, the most precocious of recent art-world tricksters, and certainly one of the most ingenious manipulators of perceptual puns. Hazlitt has this same attitude toward play. His work has the same exterior quality of puzzlement and delight: the same clever ambiguity of form. If there is an iconoclastic tradition (to use an alignment of terms which somehow makes sense today) of trickster-artists, then it must include Magritte, Duchamp and Tuttle.

Including Hazlitt as the novice among them would not be at all premature. For much as they have done, Hazlitt has confronted and bewildered the spectator on a variety of levels: most notably on those which are conceptual, literal, subliminal, formal and, perhaps most characterstically, sensual.

CHRISTOPHER KNOWLES

In initially confronting the work of Christopher Knowles we are confronting, in many ways, the most provocative creations in this show. A former autistic child, Knowles is now in his late teens and has been working with serveral "avant-garde" artists, the most well known of whom is Robert Wilson. Having primarlily been directed in peformance art or in theatre, he has recently adopted the medium of paint. Often accompanied by more verbal means of expression such as written messages in paint on canvas or paper, his work shows the sensibility of a child but with the added character of a potentially adult individual extending himself toward specific conditions in life.

In Knowles' work, sign and symbol are not ambiguously rendered, but rather are met with immediate recognition by the viewer. Taken as exercises, these works ask us "What does this painting plainly show?" Answer: "A house. A forest. An ape." More generally, these works provoke one to ask "What makes this painting "naturalistic" and "representational"? The questions this time are not so easily answered.

We are accustomed to a perceptual system of identification which is, of course, largely a result of our environmental and cultural trial and error experience. However, we also have an a priori neuro-physiological/cognitive system which inherently identifies forms and images while simultaneously evaluating them. This kind of involuntary recognition and response to forms and images never previously experienced is what behaviorists have referred to as an "innate releasing mechanism" (IRM) in animals and as a "central excitatory mechanism" (CEM) in human beings. The Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Kohler has referred to these structures in the central nervous systems of human beings as "isomorphs", and Jung has called them the "archetypes" of the "collective unconscious".

It is precisely these isomorphs or archetypes which Knowles directly utilizes. These structures are inborn and are both uniform and universal. Archetypes are uniform in their roles as signifiers and in the significance which they convey. They are universal in their frequency of occurrence throughout the entire history and geography of humankind. Furthermore, these archetypes are the constituent elements from which all mythologies are created, in all times and in all races.

These constituent elements are distilled by Knowles from more complex sign systems. Stripped bare, they are not merely "visual musings" as the critic Judith Lopes Cardozo has suggested[1], but are direct skeletal elements of our own mythopoeic urges. Knowles' paintings reveal a level of pre-operational thought. That is, they show a level of response to the world which is still very much an act of simple assimilation: the acquaintance of the most simple and basic forms of thought, action, physical forms, order,number and relations. This is the level upon which more advanced, concrete and logical thought levels are supported. It is a level which is still inwardly directed, and egocentric, but it is also a level of initial responses to the extenal, objective world. It is the level upon which young children operate.

Although many of the "avant-garde" artists and critics of the last decade have hailed Knowles as a genius, Cardozo has suggested that "an artist must have the

1. *Artforum*, (February 1980, volume XVIII, No. 6)
"Reviews", pg. 98.

autonomy to recognize his own productions". Until Knowles is able to recognize that autonomy, she complains, she will "have difficulties with his work." This is an understandable position, and one which I also have difficulties with when loftily trying to formulate a definitive stance on the nature of "art". However, I don't do that too much anymore. I am more concerned with the work in front of me, call it what you will. I am concerned with what it means, how it interacts with my own experience, thought and values, and lastly, with how it relates to the inner compulsion of its maker. Whether or not Knowles is cognizant of the full implications of his labor is of little consequence to my own interaction with it. His response to the world is valid as a response, and that is a sufficient enough criterion for supporting my particular bias.

Knowles' work is substantial enough to merit its inclusion in an exhibition which inquires into the nature of painting, which has at its core the utilization of signs and symbols. It poses serious questions to answer, which I regret are outside the scope of this essay. However, I remain firm in my conviction that art can result from as basic an activity as play, as well as from the rigors of intense speculation.

To quote the anthropologist Joseph Campbell, "animals are without speech – and one reason, surely is their inability to play with sound. They are without art – and the reason again, is their inability to play with forms."[2]

It is just this capacity for play and for shaping and organizing images and forms which enables Christopher Knowles, the autistic "genius", to create new stimuli, both for himself and for others.

LOIS LANE

There is so great a totality within any specific painting, drawing or collage by Lois Lane, that it becomes a difficult task indeed to approach any one example of her work with an analytical intent. Analysis is the procedure by which a subject is broken down into its constituent parts and then rebuilt bit by bit. This is done for the purpose of re-evaluating that subject in its entirety. Although the impact of Lane's work is heavily due to the relationships of its parts, her image and field relationships are so complementary, and so strongly bound, that to disassemble them would also mean to disrupt their truest meaning. It is difficult for me to do this; it is almost impossible for Lane.

It is rare to encounter contemporary art in which so subtle a balance is at play. The delicacy of Lane's paint or collage surfaces is one quality to which we might attribute this equilibrium. If so, however, the necessary counterbalance must be the delicacy of her imagery. In addition, Lane's colors are discreet and classical in their ordering effect. Rather than commanding attention, her colors serve to key-down the potentially over-dominating shapes and help to regulate the over-all composition.

When she makes use of the formula often used by Malevich or Ad Reinhardt, that of painting a black shape on a black field, Lane's sense of monochromatic shades and tones is revealed to be one of her most stylistically effective devices. Similarly, when she paints a black or grey shape upon a white field, her powers of isolating images become magnified.

2. *Joseph Campbell,* **The Masks of God, Primitive Mythology,** (Penguin Books, 1969), pg. 40.

In Lane's work, shape identifies the image more than any other property, save of course, line – her designator of shape (as opposed to color shading). If her line is hard and direct, her shapes are sensuous in their simplicity. Primordial, organic, anthropomorphic, shape is her most relaxed and most finely intuited response. It is what invests her emblems with their peculiarly haunting after-effect. Their imprint upon our memory seems to be as internally stimulated as it is externally. These are the shapes which escape from the very center of Lane's being, a center which, on a structural level, is of a collective nature and which is embedded within us all. It should therefore come as no surprise that they invoke, so effectively, the sign stimuli which they do.

Embedded within a vast amorphorous field, there is rarely any visual component which is too abruptly spaced. When more than one or two images are to be found, their configuration is so elegantly designed that the intervals of space declare, rather than merely assume, their most appropriate design. This spatial expanse allures, seduces, and envelopes our aesthetic faculties.

In this respect, Lane's work merits comparison with the best of Barnett Newman's paintings. Although neither artist shares the other's sensibilities with regard to color or shape, they share a common attitude toward the painting field. The spatially transcendent harmony of both artists' works is uniquely spiritual in its reach, primordial at its source, and reductionist at its formal center of design. From a historical perspective, Newman and Lane form a time bracket around the minimalist tendencies in painting of the fifties, sixties and seventies: Newman at the reductionist vanguard, Lane at an interpretive about-face. Whereas Newman's work anticipated further reduction into the pictoral plane and negation of any literary tendencies, Lane has emerged from the vestiges of minimalism and abstract expressionism with a literal predilection for personal iconography.

Seeing herself as a "traditionalist" in the finest sense of the word, Lane is reverent in her attitude toward the "ancient" art of painting. There is even a talismanic quality in her work which prompts me to compare it with the numenistic images of the paleolithic caves of southern France and northern Spain. However, Lane's images are not numenistic, nor does their modernity allow for an easy comparison to the art of the great caves. In fact, these associations hamper Lane, a self-determined painter who would rather be liberated from the constraints of art-historic analysis. In its ambiguity, her work serves her best as a self portrait. She does not invest her work with any precise significance. In fact, Lois Lane has so great an aversion to the logic of references that her art functions as her ultimate release from them.

JANIS PROVISOR

Janis Provisor is one artist seemingly intent upon building a vocabulary of psychic signs and symbols. In fact, she seems to be on her way to exploring the great motifs found the world over in primitive societies. The forms she has adopted are a composite of both those which have been culturally extracted and those which are of her own immediate invention. This division is not necessarily a duality, since all human beings contain the same "sign stimuli" within them.

Provisor's sign stimuli in particular seem to be enjoying a prolific career. She seems to be split between making three dimensional totemic objects and two dimensional pictographs. She settles for a synthesis of the two, which is understandable, for in this respect she sacrifices neither the illusion of scale (since sculpture cannot signify any scale beyond itself), nor the "objectness" of the ritual instrument. However, Provisor utilizes neither painting's nor sculpture's full implications. The flattening of perspective in her work lends itself to frontal and overhead views of physical objects in space, in the manner of primitive or even Egyptian funerary art. This flattened use of specific objects gives the painting an emblematic significance which is highly multi-referential. Although the equivocal nature of her work lends itself to mystery, the distinct familiarity of her images and their sparsity prevent them from sinking into the depths of abstruse cryptogenics. Mere images tease and puzzle the viewer, but some interpretation can always be found near the surface. For example, a blue oval or circle embedded within her objects might be interpreted as being an overhead view of a lake or pond. Alternately, the same emblem might incite iconographic associations with the sky, or perhaps even with a mirror.

The effect of Provisor's work is almost therapeutic. This might be attributed in part to the vestiges of our primitive instincts. As documented by J.S.Frazer[3] and Joseph Campbell[4], totemic artifacts were used by primitive individuals or by tribes (depending on local customs) as protective devices, securing them from the harmful forces of nature. This was done, according to the primitive mind, by unifying the self or the tribe with those forces and becoming one with the macrocosm. From another perspective, that of Claude Levi Strauss[5], these totems served as much for code forms of this unity as they did for the supernatural belief in them.

In this light, the calming, almost hypnotic nature of Provisor's work can be attributed to just this kind of desire for personal unity found within us all. Certainly, if nothing else, Provisor is attempting to escape the surface tensions of contemporary life, the cynicism of the modern existential attitude and the aggressive behavior of forward thrusting civilizations. In this respect Provisor's work is remarkably akin to Romanticism. Modern "totems" or "icons" do appear in the work. The bow, in the guise of neck-tie, is a symbol of a modern "dressed-to-kill" society; and the killing of society is just what this emblem might suggest.

The totem was, after all, often used as an invocation of a spirit which lost its bodily life-form through death at the hands of the tribal hunter, in order to make reparations to the spirit for the necessity of its physical annihilation. In more agrarian tribes, the organic totems such as trees, bushes, or leaves might have served as models for the mystery of life. It might be seen in Provisor's work that plant-life, held at a much higher level of significance in primitive cultures than much of our more "removed" society, has been replaced by the preoccupation with fashion. The bow-tie is just such an archetype of that fashion, and one which Provisor alludes to consistently.

Again, the danger in these particular interpretations of another's emblems might, in Dostoevsky's phrase, "cut both ways."

3. *Sir James George Frazer*, **The Golden Bough,** (The Macmillan Co., 1949), pg. 689.
4. *Joseph Campbell*, op. cit., pgs. 129, 295.
5. *Claude Levi-Strauss*, **The Savage Mind,** (The University of Chicago Press, 1966).

The recurring ovular shapes are among Provisor's most complex emblems and might even be compared with the churinga, a venerated instrument in tribal rites. Usually made of highly polished stone or wood, the churinga often represented these artifacts to have signified the principle of difference in life:[6] the difference between the past and present; the difference between the identity of the worshipper and that of the worshipped; the difference between the location of the descendant and that of the ancestor. As churingas of her own life, Provisor's works serve as miniature shrines and memorials to her own changing location and relationship to the world.

Another recurring symbol of Provisor's work is that of the concentric circle. If considered as a mandala (a circular symbol which, in the realms of religious practice, and interpretive psychology, might be drawn, painted, danced, or sculpted), the theories of Carl Jung might be successfully applied. Essentially, Jung believed that the "spontaneous" occurrence of the mandala in a modern individual's creation symbolizes a "condition of psychic disassociation"[7](e.g., in children whose parents have recently divorced). Jung saw the mandala as an attempt of the psyche to go deeper into the self in order to regain that unity which has been lost. In Tibetan Buddhism the mandala has the significance of an instrument designated for the unification of opposites in religious rites. Similarly, in medieval alchemy, the mandala served as a symbol for the accumulation and synthesis of the four opposing elements of the universe: air, earth, fire and water.

I don't wish to suggest that any of these themes are a part of Provisor's intent. I only wish to illustrate the multiplicity inherent in her emblems, the wealth with which the imagination invests them, and lastly, the cross-references they have in the larger context of world culture.

No matter how rigorous a study of hermeneutics one might employing his or her approach toward emblematic concerns in art, or for that matter, toward art in general, one will come up against walls of hidden meaning. These walls are often impenetrable, and are often meant to be. Behind those walls lie realms of thought which have their own cosmogonies, their own time, space and laws of physics. Consequently, behind these walls there will also be a unique set of values. One must learn to remain content with one's own inferences when approaching the enigmatic.

The mythologist, Raffaeli Pettazzoni has said of mythology (and I wish to apply the same opinion to emblematic art): that it is "at once logical and illogical, logical and magical, rational and irrational."[8]

The artists in this exhibition have just these qualities. This must account for the reasons as to why they are met with both so broad an appeal and so provocative a response.

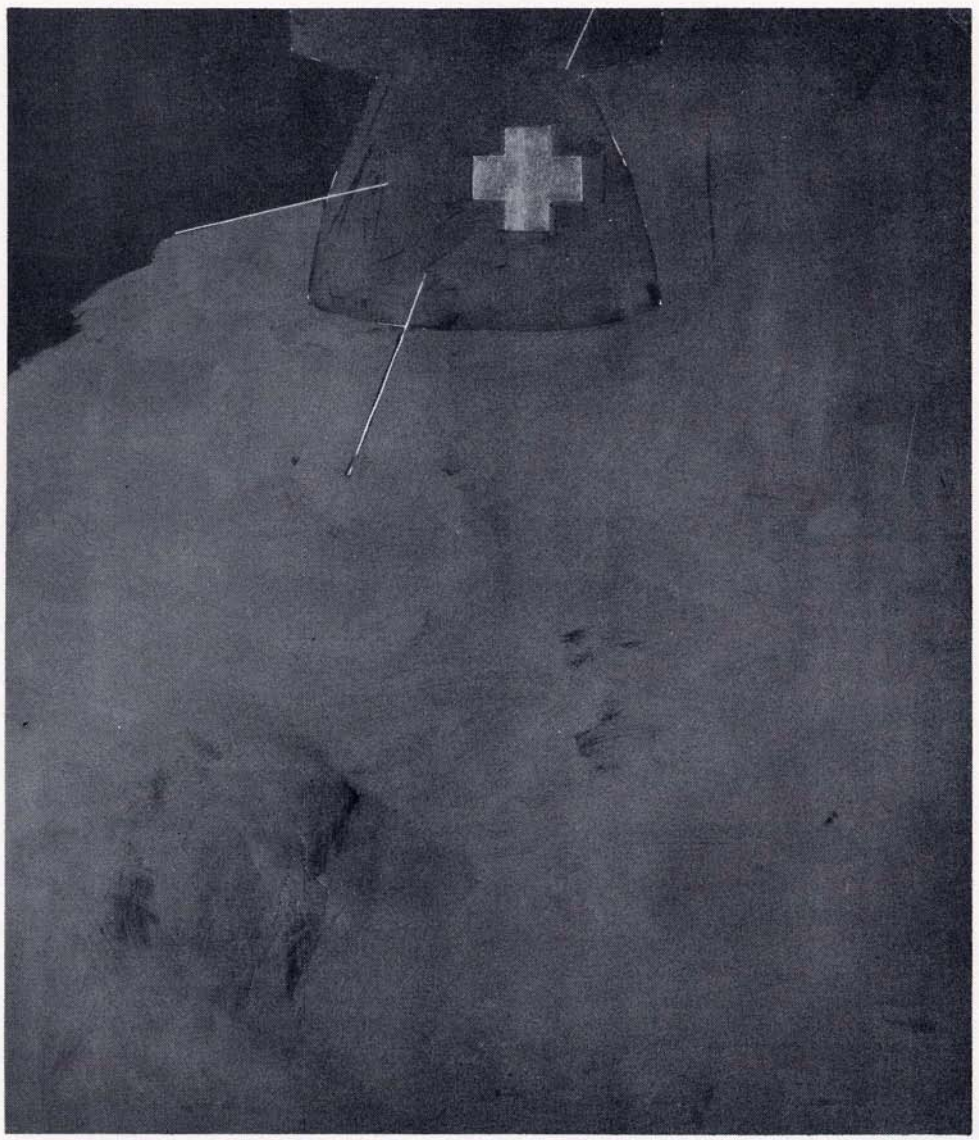
G. Roger Denson
Curator
HALLWALLS

6. *ibid.* pg. 76.

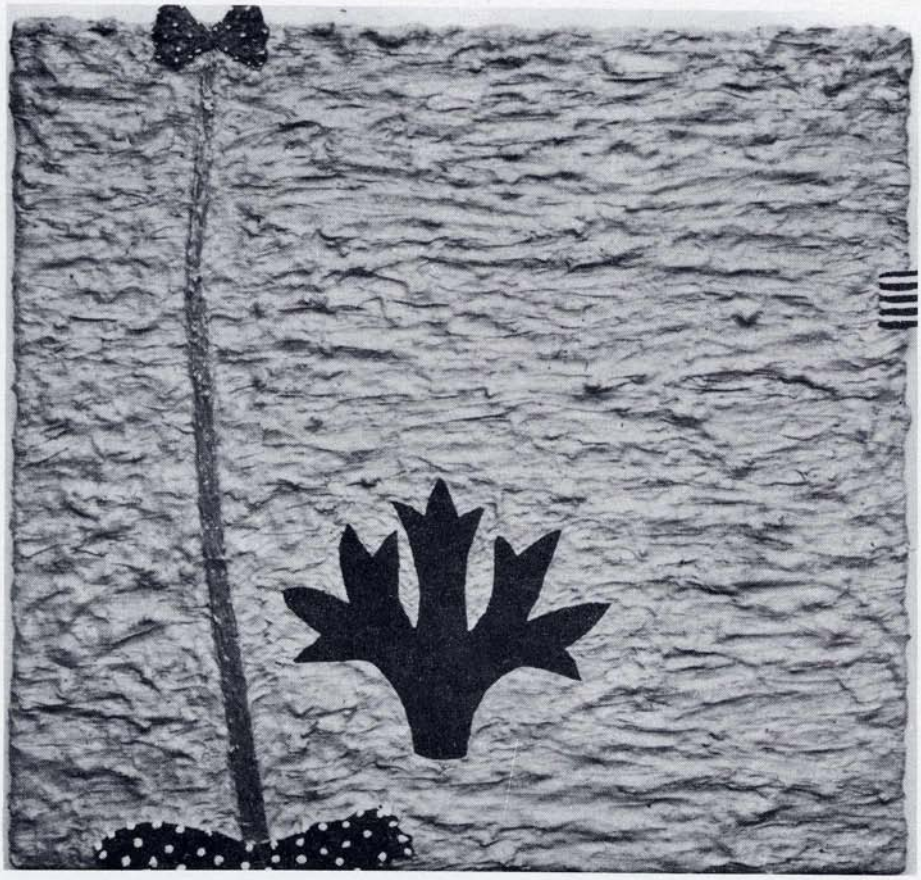
7. *Carl G. Jung.* **Mandala Symbolism,** (The Princeton University Press, 1973), pgs 3-4.

8. *Raffaele Pettazzoni,* "Myths of Beginning and Creation Myths", in **Essays on the History of Religions,** (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1954) p. 31.

Christopher Knowles
The Monkey (CK-133), 1979
acrylic on canvas
64" x 64"

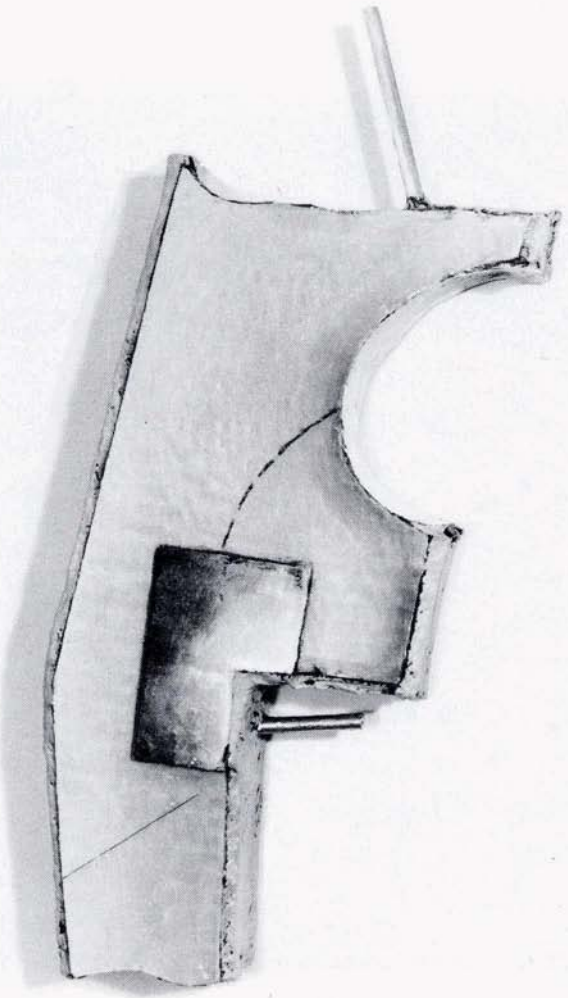


Lois Lane
Untitled No. 9, 1979
oil on canvas



Janis Provisor
Love Lights, 1980
oil and rhoplex on canvas
23½" x 24½"

Janis Provisor
Northern Dukes, 1980
oil and rhoplex on canvas
23½" x 23½"



Don Hazlitt
Untitled, 1980
Stick, cardboard, oil, papier maché
14" x 7" x 1½

Printed in U. S. A.