

## MARTIN MYERS

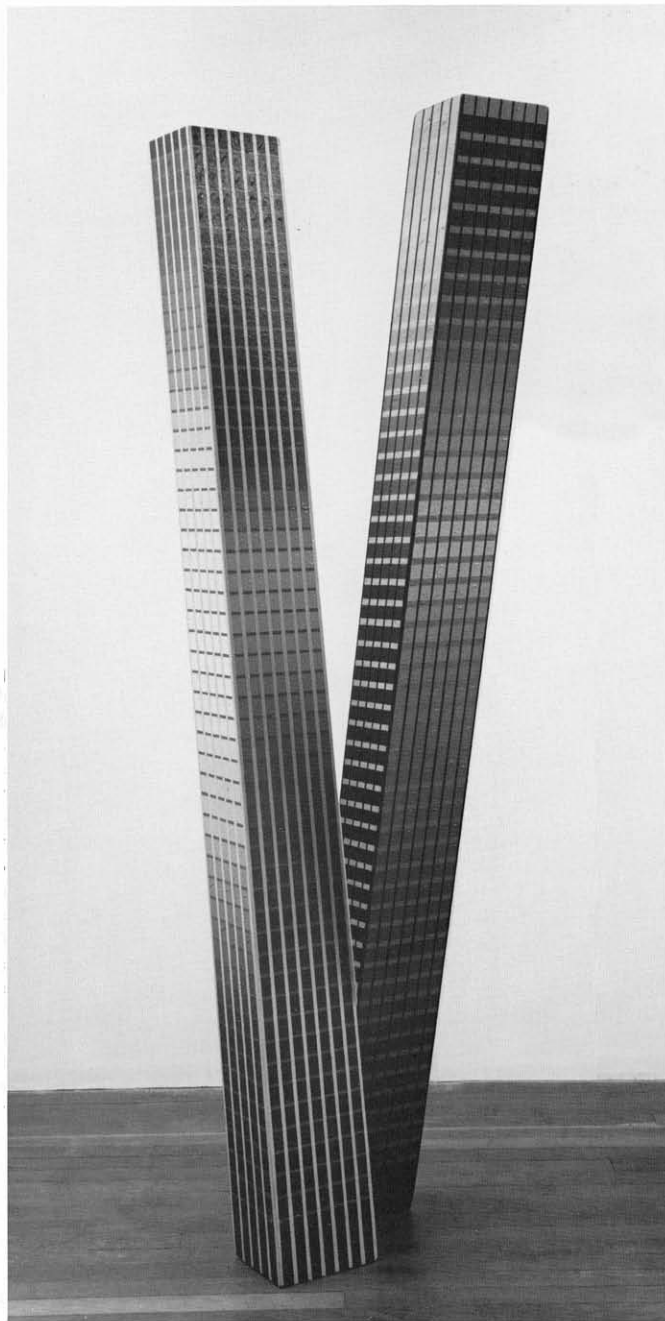
These days artificiality is everything. I realized this one sunny morning wading through the *Times* on my vine-covered front porch in L.A. In its "Calendar" section (one of an innumerable profusion: the paper is an unwitting parody of an old L.A. saw, to wit, "x number of sections in search of the news") I spotted an accuracy – somebody was quoted as having said "Pop is the father of us all."

Martin Myers is symptomatic of a generation of American artists, just coming into their own, whose consciousness of art dates from the early 1960s, their late childhood-adolescent years and Pop art's halcyon days. Whatever else it was and did, Pop was made of and celebrated the other-than-natural, the artificial. As an aesthetic it utilized previously discredited images – those of advertising – and their accompanying palette of billboard and neon color. I consider Pop a publicity of beauty about publicity itself: a morality of amorality possibly. In any case, it infected, perhaps irrevocably, the art ethos with irony, a previously unknown value in American art. Of course at this point irony had long been an established member of the European avant-garde's repertoire of substantiating feelings, a legacy of World War I. There may be a case to be made for its comparable development, a half century later, in the States as the American electorate became disillusioned with the aims and policies of its own foreign affairs establishment, a disillusionment which began in earnest after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, culminating some years later in a national disgust with the conduct of internal affairs in the hands of the Nixonians.

I think irony is the most appropriate word for it, although there had been a dislocation – either one of nostalgia or one of industrial- or rural-inspired chauvinism – in "American scene" painting from the time of the Ash Can artists through Hopper and the midwestern cornponers right up to and including the likes of Andrew Wyeth and George Segal. With the possible exception of Hopper, all this art is properly thought to be "regional."

By contrast, one of the reasons Pop was, and continues to be, interesting is that it was an international style, a contemporaneously international style, perhaps the first. Any consumerist society could induce it. That Britain and the U.S. did first (or are thought to have) may only be a reflection of another kind of chauvinism – a critical one. Anyway, such otherwise disparate artists as Richard Hamilton, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein had by 1960 begun making a new art that *tout à coup* deflated all the late existential heavings of abstract expressionism.

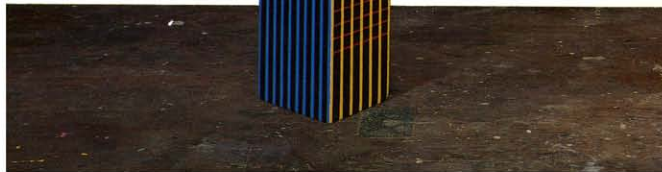
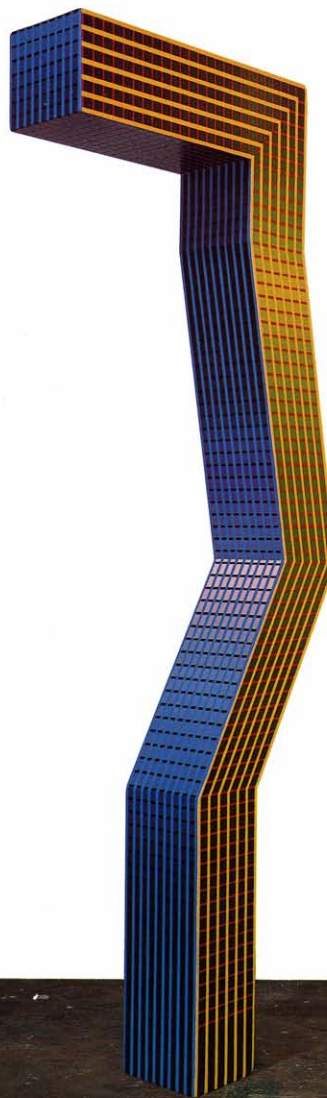
One of the most striking things about Pop, from our vantage point some twenty years later, is the absence of any real Pop sculpture within it. There is almost none I can think of, Oldenburg aside. And I think in time Oldenburg will come to be considered a master draughtsman and a creative comic late Surrealist, but an artist whose work, after the first ten years of his production, sacrificed all its other attributes in favor of scale – blind, egomaniacal, distinctly unhumorous scale. It is true that Joe Goode had a few pieces with painted milk bottles on the floor in front of large expanses of painted canvas, that Wesselman employed *bas-relief* and real objects in his otherwise traditional paintings of female nudes, that Warhol made the Brillo boxes, Jim Dine his big straw heart, and so forth. But there was no real sustained sculptural work during the first important years of the Pop style, the early 60s. Somewhat later Lichtenstein produced two groups of sculpture: first (in about 1965) the painted, glazed ceramic womens'



heads and cups, and then the *moderne* or *deco* "modern sculptures" of 1967. Two bodies of upright work, one partly anthropomorphic, the other architectural, but neither especially Pop. If Myers has any clear forbears, Lichtenstein is foremost among them. In one of our conversations of the past year, Myers remarked about his change in college from studying philosophy to making art, "the easiest way to get to reality was to add to it rather than dissect it," which struck me as a most Lichtensteinian assertion. The two also share a taste for lurid color and an obsession with the game of art.

At the moment there is an entire gallery in New York (featuring the work of such artists as Thomas Lawson, Robert Longo, Jack Goldstein, and Laurie Simmons) of what I call "cold pop." Their work is a particular kind of Pop *reprise*, all ad imagery, poses, mass media illustration, poignant trivialization via isolation, clinical presentation. Other, related variants of the style by their peers infuses the clinicality with a few poorly disguised skills, mostly drawing of a deliberately imperfect nature and some mood color: David Salle, Ken Goodman, for example. It is interesting that all these neo-Pop people make wallbound art – even Longo, nominally a sculptor, settles for shallow relief in his glossy updates of Segal. Not wholly unexpectedly, much like its progenitor, there is very little real sculpture within it. What is more troubling, however, is the widespread lack of significant sculpture among Myers' generation in general, especially when considered against the frenzy of painting activity occupying many of their colleagues.

As we all know and believe, the next dominant cycle after Pop was Minimalism, a resolutely three-dimensional movement which produced almost no orthodox painting. The visual and ideological thrust of Minimalism was horizontal, complemented by a passion for unadorned material – for the mute, the still, the pre-mechanical. New York's prevalent sensibility in this move was for sensual woods, metals, plastics; while California's was for a more neutral (if more mystical), ambient, de-materialized and abundant medium – sunlight. The horizontality I speak of manifested itself either literally as an obedience to gravity (Carl Andre's floor decorations) or more complicitly in the rejection of height, base or plinth (as in the work of Judd, Morris, LeVa or Mason). I would argue that all this straightforward, deliberately non-illusionist work had counterparts in the larger spectrum of the contemporary arts in America, from Judson church dancing to the rock music of Bob Dylan. This expression of naturalness, democratized and applied socially, became known as the "hippy" way. Of course the Minimalists must have thought themselves very far from the hippies, with the exception of their shared antipathy to American involvement in the wars of southeast Asia, but I see this nascent universal awareness of humanity's connection to the planet (an idea later codified into "ecology") and the avant-garde's fixation with honest materials and treatment of sculpture's physical reality on earth as part of the same *zeitgeist*. The almost unanimous disfavor that currently afflicts the Minimalists' position (not to say its objects, especially the early ones) seems to further substantiate my attempts at relating what is happening now to its immediate past. The temper of our times, which feels like a curious schizoid hybridization of a pluralistic humanitarianism that allows for nearly anything but its immediate predecessors and the most paranoid and tragically irrelevant jingoism, is more reactionary than revolutionary. Thus there may be a concentric logic to the ubiquity of a recent kind of sculpture which exploits both the unconsciously mimetic architecture of Minimalism and the scale and landscape features of what passes as naturalist art. These large intrusions are known generically as "site-specific" sculpture – another hysterical art world misnomer,



and their universal approbation may account in part for the scarcity of known alternatives. It is a dinosaur way of making art, and without the obligatory diet of federal grants I anticipate its dinosaur death. But what of other kinds of sculpture? Alas, other than a boom in *fin-de-siècle* bronze *bric-a-brac*, there is precious little. Especially puzzling, at least to me, is the absence of any human-scale work. The dialectic is the larger-than-life or house size against the smaller-than-life shelf size. Few in-betweens, and almost none of them totemic.

With the exception of David Smith's long and fruitful exploration of the abstract possibilities of anthropomorphic forms, upright sculpture has not fared well in the post-World War II period of Anglo-American sculpture. The Latin cultures have a somewhat different history during the same period – one that adulates such anthropomorphists as Giacometti, Marini, Manzu and Zuniga, among others. The American and English artistic community has been interested in the work of abstract artists like Calder, who in his gravitationally-obedient pieces can be thought of as working with diagonal axes, or the likes of Moore and Caro, both horizontal composers – one representational, the other geometric. In more recent years one, possibly two, generations of younger or less recognized sculptors have made their work sufficiently well-known as to permit comparisons. I would suggest four who are particularly relevant to Martin Myers: Richard Serra, Mark di Suvero, Anne Truitt, and John McCracken. There are no real similarities between their work (aside from three of the four being Californians), other than a willingness to make vertical sculptures at a time when other compositional devices were more in favor. It must be said that, for all their contrariness, none of the men took up the challenge of resolutely vertical sculpture; both Serra (and here I mean the earlier prop pieces) and McCracken *leaned* their verticals against walls or other elements in the ensemble, and that di Suvero has consistently favored an enlarged tripod arrangement, another and slightly more complicated lean-to and a rough interpretation of some of Calder's genre of vision. Truitt, however, produced an entire suite of body sized, painted rectangular wooden forms. At the time their severe, and subtle, coloration suggested a connection to the so-called restraint of Minimalism, although they appear today as refined and engagingly idiosyncratic versions of an essentially neo-plastic modus.

The anomalous circumstances of Martin Myers' childhood and adolescence, that because of his father's business he lived in Brazil for five years beginning in 1964, permitted him an early and relatively in-depth access to Lichtenstein's work on the occasion of the 1966 São Paulo Bienal. Its American art section also included work by Andy Warhol and Tom Wesselman. Myers now recalls the strong impressions this Pop art show made on him, although when he returned to the States in 1969 to enroll at Cornell he set out on a liberal rather than fine arts course of studies.

His year in Ithaca was given to studying philosophy, although Myers quickly lost interest in the abstract, feeling he "wanted to do something tangible, to make art." After a brief sojourn in rural Alabama ("a longing for underdevelopment"), thirty months at a college in Richmond, Virginia followed. This provided contact with the Washington Color School and the work of Truitt, whose studio is in the Washington, D.C. vicinity. In Virginia Myers wanted "to use film in a sculptural way" and "make puns on art," but abandoned this vein after seeing some of Nauman's early pieces. Then came his San Francisco residency – he was attracted to the area for its "ironic stance" as opposed to East Coast art being "too dry." But San Francisco, it seems, only tolerates certain kinds of irony –

mostly literary illiteracies, the more obvious the better, and rough-hewn versions of the aw-shucks Adam's apple school. This is a hometown myopia that appears to bother him not at all; "I thrive on adversity," as he puts it.

At bottom there can be nothing artificial about good, that is to say, profound art. I call Myers' work artificial only to distinguish it from other, more overtly naturalist systems of organizing three-dimensional art: today's mud daubers, sand castle builders, twig weavers, et al. The sad fate of their industrious "ecologic" work is that, like life, there is an innate hierarchical structure to organizational systems in art – more complex art, like more complex organisms, sustains greater interest and ultimately proves more worthwhile than less complex art. The fate of simple art parallels that of simple cells: quick absorption, rapid digestion, exhaustion.

With a formal, highly evolved system such as modern architecture as its prototype Myers' work eludes so unsatisfactory an end. Initially, in fact, his sculpture suffered from too literal a transformation from life into art. In part this was due to his coming to sculpture from painting. Beginning in Virginia he had tried to bring Pop and Minimal art together in paintings of isolated monuments. Eventually, these water towers and cenotaphs came to be situated on parking lots and roof tops. Drawings and paintings of single structures, then one of two, buildings ensued. In an effort to find his own sense of scale Myers made three or four "very minimal, basically blank" paintings, the final one 6'x26' long. Even then he felt he couldn't get past the fact that "painting was a box on the wall." Concluding, "the only thing that made sense was to build the pieces, then deal with both issues – painting and sculpture." This was autumn, 1974. Myers' exact leap from two to three dimensions is probably untraceable, but he remembers looking a lot at Sol LeWitt's and Agnes Martin's work and thinking about doing some paintings of Minimal sculpture. Instead, the first piece was a re-construction of the double skyscraper painting as a sculpture 11' high x 5' wide x 3' deep, painted and with real wood mullions tacked on. There were a number of good reasons to choose the skyscraper form: "it was almost like a Pop image"; "it was an image you could quickly by-pass"; "it carries a lot of information"; and "I didn't want a stylistic signature". The earliest skyscrapers mimic both the undecorated rectangular form of their real life progenitors and their muted tertiary color schemes.

From the one piece of this period still in Myers' studio I would say this work was hampered by his attempt at painting shadows on it, in this case a shadow that replicates some sort of presumably nearly Georgian structure, an Independence Hall or similar colonial clone. He quickly superseded this deadening literalism, and the suite of works which followed (all about 10' high – a constant scale through everything he has since made – by 2' or 3' widths-depths) gained considerably as he varied the supposedly reflected or originating light on each face of the sculpture either to recall sunlight or electric street light or interior fluorescence.

Right from the start his color was unusually brash and intended, as I have noted, as an indicator of light. Even in this earlier stage of his evolution Myers used color to distinguish one plane from another, alternately and simultaneously to expand and to contract certain areas he wished emphasized. The *trompe l'oeil* is both deliberate and a bit crude, consisting as it does in this work of one grid color per plane and tape-guided vertical marks braced by like-colored and hand-painted horizontals. This "overlying" grid orders the less than subtle and



hand-painted “underlying” color gradations – the windows, if you will. His is a rowdy and wholly conscious perversion of Op art’s visual vibrati.

These are the single rectangular plinths in this show, and they constitute Myers’ work until about 1978. All are given womens’ names as if to emphasize their debutante dignity and carriage, good posture-and-pearls girls. Lately they have proven too spare for the artist, after seeing a group of them at a show in Washington’s Corcoran Gallery he decided they were too much four-sided paintings.

*Madrid* (1978) seems to have been one of the first of the new, more complicated, expressionist X, T, L-shaped pieces that comprise the last three years’ oeuvre. This includes contortionists such as *Jennifer* (1979), *Laura* (1980), and *Carrie* (1980). They are enrichments of the former basic rectangular form by means of added diagonals, horizontals, sometimes doubled verticles (*Reni*, 1980, for instance). But this is only the most obvious change to have taken place. There is another, somewhat less noticeable but equally as promising advance in Myers’ new subversion of the overpainted grid. They are no longer one-color-per-plane, but can change as forcefully and with as much spatial caprice as the undercolor. Warped, curving, reversed grids! Supra-structural dementia, supposedly containing all that kandy-kolored, tangerine-flake, etc. mass.

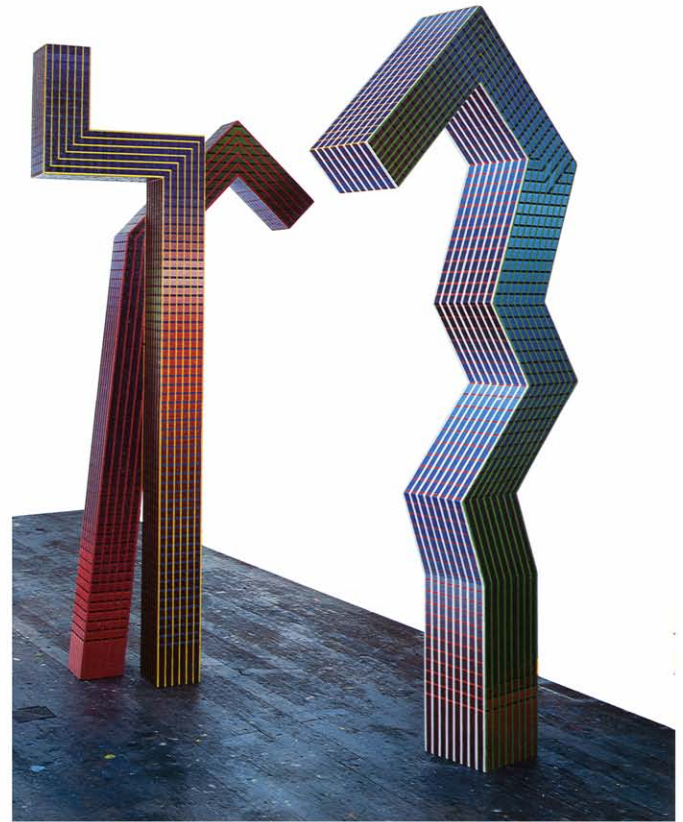
Myers’ work is on the human scale, the lack of which I was bemoaning. It is also abstractly totemic, an anomalous attribute these days when most vertical work degenerates into grossly *retardataire* statue-making rendered all the more excruciating by the obvious absence of requisite skills on its creator’s part. Unskilled “realism” doesn’t look very real at all. His work has color, and it is contemporary color, credible color. There are thousands of remaining permutations through which Myers can put his basic configuration of forms, so much for serial art. The work is good-natured; I find it beautiful in spirit and by sight.

If, as Myers once asserted to me, architecture has provided most of the new imagery of the 20th century and the skyscraper is the most 20th century of all architectural conventions, his work also assumes another, more social role as a comment on the most public handiwork of our time. He has addressed himself to the issue with characteristic humor – may I be simplistic momentarily and propose his work be considered a visual parody? Writing about Pop art for the catalogue of the Whitney Museum Pop art exhibition he organized there in 1975 Lawrence Alloway noted, “But making a parody is not the same thing as satire. Parody in the classical sense is a kind of imitation, something like a paraphrase. It is not necessarily making fun of anything, rather it puts the imitated work in a new context.”

The current miasma in which sculpture, and to some extent painting, finds itself did not arrive unheralded. Architecture experienced a similar collapse of what had been considered incontrovertible truths almost twenty years ago, and some sensitive architects decided then in the words of one of them to begin “learning from Las Vegas.” Architecture is first of all a social art, one of immeasurable and long-lasting cultural responsibility. Sculpture and painting are private pursuits but they assume value in direct proportion to their willingness to comprehend and refresh age old universalities. In calling most of today’s sculpture “regional!” I am castigating not only its self-chosen temporality, since that may be a function of its makers’ egotism and thus disappear in time. Rather, it is their irresponsibility toward the importance of what they do that cannot be condoned.

The painful discovery of the fallibility of the so-called International Style of architecture by its own practitioners may only have presaged a comparable assessment of modernist orthodoxy in the other plastic arts. Like their architect colleagues painters and sculptors may soon be obliged to allow themselves to recall that their arts are first of all sensate pleasures and that no amount of theory or historical inevitability can substitute for vision. Then we may all enjoy a true cultural revolution in which a thousand flowers bloom: the best, the most complex, the most life-like forever.

Richard Armstrong



RENI 1980  
FORTUNA 1980