

Contemporary Cutouts



Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

The works in this exhibition were selected by Susan Lubowsky, Branch Director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris. Special thanks are extended to intern Pamela Johnson who helped with the research for this publication.

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Cover:

TOM WESSELMANN

Still Life with Petunias, Lilies, and Fruit, 1986

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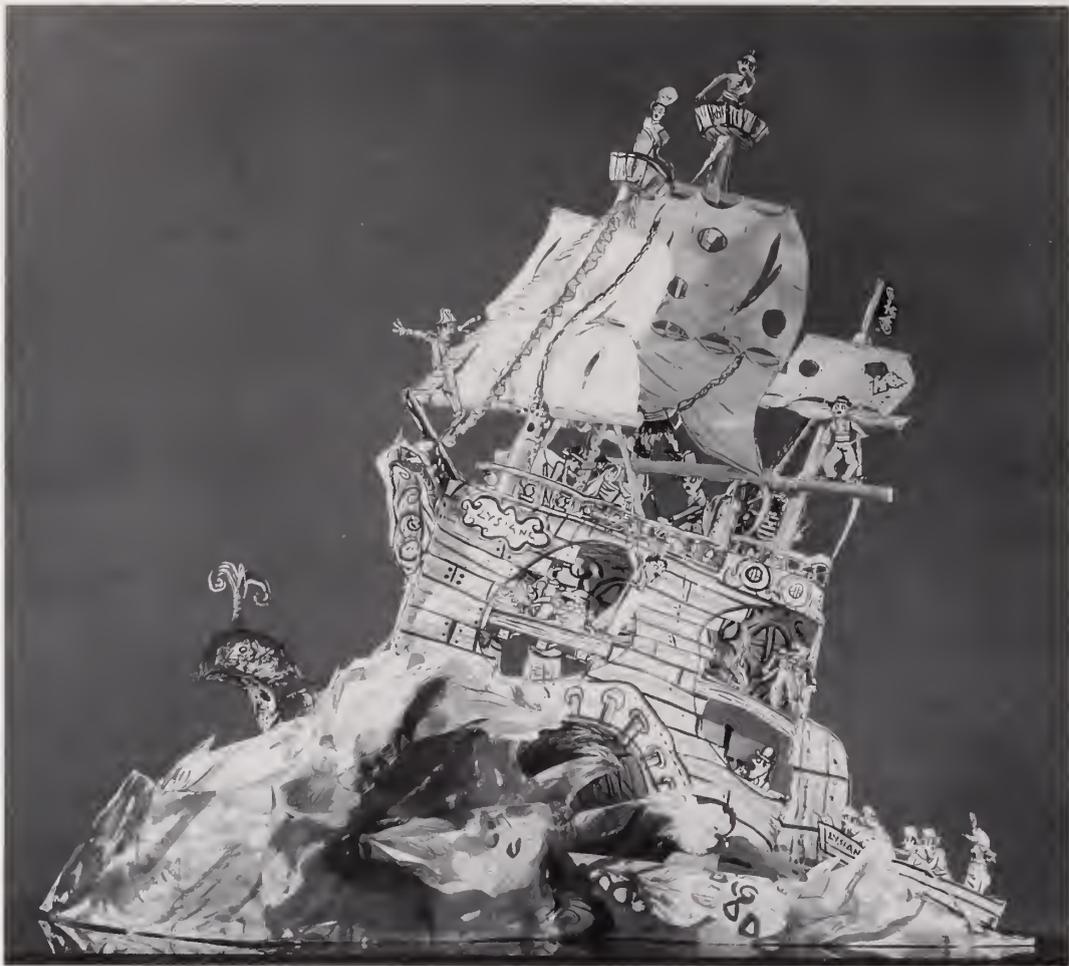
Contemporary Cutouts

During the 1960s, in the wake of Abstract Expressionism, artists began to question the traditional distinction between sculpture and painting. The cutout was one of the new art forms that emerged to challenge these conventions. Figurative artists such as Red Grooms, Alex Katz, Roy Lichtenstein, and Larry Rivers either cut out or reinterpreted images from their paintings, thus removing them from the artificial world of the picture plane to create a form of two-dimensional sculpture. In Happenings and performance events, artists' cutouts were used to impersonate live actors, raising provocative questions about illusion and reality. Katz's soldiers and props for Kenneth Koch's 1962 production *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* were cutouts. In Groom's film *Fat Feet* (1966), a cartoon man leaps from a burning building, while in the grand finale of his 1968 film *Tappy Toes*, cutouts of Picasso descend a staircase. The simplified images appropriated from advertising and billboard design, which informed the vanguard Pop movement, also lent themselves to the cutout format—although only Lichtenstein acknowledged the Pop label. For the others, the cutout provided a release from the formal restraints of the canvas without binding them to Pop Art.

From advertising billboards, Alex Katz appropriated the illusionistic devices of cropping large-scale images and of attaching cutout plywood extensions to make his own cutout forms. His first such work was prompted by his dissatisfaction with a painting of two figures in an interior. He therefore cut the figures out of the background and pinned them on the wall. Later, he mounted them on board as freestanding figures. Soon, Katz was painting directly on metal and cutting out both the silhouettes and the internal negative shapes. Retaining an ambiguous stance as both painting and sculpture, these cutouts confounded traditional notions of form and dimensionality. *Ada (Black and White Dress)* (1980) and *Rudy* (1980) (a portrait of Katz's friend, the filmmaker Rudolph Burckhardt) are thin, freestanding slivers of metal, cropped at the side edges. Katz himself sees them as icons—"I make symbols out of things I see. . . . It isn't just a portrait, it goes off to Person." His wife, Ada, and son, Vincent, appear consistently in his work—represented here in *Ada (Black and White Dress)*, *Bathers (Vincent and Anastasia)* (1984), and *Coleman Pond* (1975). But although Katz generally depicts his intimates, emotion never comes through. Even *Sunny* (1982), the family dog, elicits no sentimentality—he is read simply as Dog.



Alex Katz
Sunny, 1982



Red Grooms
Charlie's Pirate Ship, 1985

Red Grooms' association with Katz during the late 1950s profoundly influenced his work. Inspired by Katz's cut-outs, and "the unrealness about the sharpness of their edges," Grooms moved steadily away from the canvas "to make something more concrete, more real than painting." As Carter Ratcliff noted, he played "with the possibilities of flattening three-dimensional forms and fleshing out two-dimensional ones." The games, books, and pop-up greeting cards of his childhood also informed Grooms' early cutouts and his methods of fabricating them. Unlike Katz's cool symbolic portraits, Grooms' subjects became caricatures, painted in a rough expressionistic style in constructions of paste, cardboard, wood, and scrap. As his style matured during the late 1960s, Grooms' "stick out paintings" grew into the monumental "sculpto-pictoramas"—humorous dioramas of Chicago and Manhattan—for

which he is best known. Much of Grooms' subject matter deals with Pop culture and its expression in Pop art. *Million Dollar Flag* (1980–81) pays homage to Jasper Johns and his Flag renderings, which have become the epitome of Pop icons. "I have always liked Jasper Johns' Flags, and when the Whitney Museum bought his *Three Flags* for one million dollars, I jumped at the chance to copy it. There was a picture of him in *Time* magazine. He looked very handsome, so I used the photograph for this portrait." In other works, Grooms focused on his nostalgia for the glamour of vintage Hollywood films. *Charlie's Pirate Ship* (1985) was inspired by a dream in which Charlie Chaplin played all the shipboard roles, from captain to mate. "It's a fantasy I concocted in the litho shop"—and the only instance in which Grooms successfully translated a dream into a work of art.



Larry Rivers
An Old Sicilian Story, 1985–86



Roy Lichtenstein
Three Brushstrokes, 1984

Like Grooms, Larry Rivers infused his work with personal memories, slapstick humor, and popular American and Hollywood icons. He began his first fully developed cutouts in the mid-1960s. In 1981, he initiated a series of relief cutouts which, he feels, “emerge as sculpture.” Both *Birds of the Northeast* (1985–86) and *An Old Sicilian Story* (1985–86) have been reworked since their original conception. The former evolved from a flat painting into a relief cutout; the latter, from a wall relief to a freestanding sculpture. *An Old Sicilian Story* arose from Rivers’ interest in juxtaposing human and animal forms. “I started to do figures and animals and found a good photo of a deer. I also had a good photo of my wife, Daria, and began to do the deer and Daria.” The deer reminded him of the ancient myth of Diana. So he took some pictures of a singer in his jazz band, posed with a bow and arrow. In the myth, Diana, bathing in the woods, was spied upon by the handsome hunter Actaeon. In punishment, she changed him into a deer and his own dogs attacked and killed him. When Rivers learned that Diana was still a cult figure in modern Sicily, he gave the work its present title. Built up from numerous layers of cutout foam core, its wedge-shaped configuration recalls a topographical map display. *Birds of the Northeast* has none of Rivers’ familiar figures or iconography. A paper placemat, illustrating North-eastern birds, inspired him to return to the reference books on nature and animals that had been an important resource for the Diana work. When he looked the birds up in his guide, he realized how crudely they were depicted on the placemat. “The center bird was the first one, but didn’t seem good enough. I bought ten books and began reading them. By the time I got to the Kingbird on the lower left, I wanted to be a birdwatcher.”

Resenting the exalted state of the painting process associated with Abstract Expressionism, Roy Lichtenstein and the other artists affiliated with the Pop movement sought to create, as Lawrence Alloway termed it, “art without metaphysical sanction.” Throughout the 1960s, his paintings of comic strip melodramas and art masterpieces spoofed art and popular culture alike. In his quintessential Pop viewpoint, all traces of the brushstroke had to be eliminated, replaced by flat surfaces and Benday dots. Lichtenstein’s ongoing series of magnified brushstroke paintings, begun in 1965, constitute an ironic joke on Abstract Expressionism, for they present a static interpretation of a gestural process. *Three Brushstrokes* (1984) amplifies the irony. The strokes, fabricated from cutout aluminum sheets, are painted in flat colors and assembled in a three-dimensional configuration.

Lichtenstein's interest in making a short-lived action (such as the stroke of a brush) concrete, had also motivated *Picture and Pitcher* (1977), one of a series of cast bronze sculptures depicting distortions and reflections on transparent objects. Derived from his Entablature paintings, in which reflections cast shadows on architectural ornaments, this series raised further perceptual quandaries. While bronze has a weighty appearance, it is used here to delineate the contours of the forms, rather than to describe their volume. Ambient space fills in the voids, creating an abrupt play between the transparent pitcher and the picture, and between positive and negative space. With the exception of the table legs, the work is two-dimensional—both sides are mirror images of each other. Lichtenstein enjoys this play between two and three dimensions. In fact, he tries to conceive of a volumetric object, such as the pitcher, as a drawing before he translates it into sculpture. "In drawing some simple still-lives, I thought, just cut the drawing out and then you have the sculpture, I elaborated on that a bit."

Tom Wesselmann made the transition from painting to sculpture in 1978, but in 1984 he began to enlarge tiny

doodles, cut them out of metal, and paint them in vivid colors. *Still Life with Petunias, Lilies, and Fruit* (1986) is a painting on aluminum composed of solid shapes and interior voids. Here, Wesselmann abandons the erotic mode that he is usually associated with for the quiet intimacy of a tabletop still life. While aluminum was the ideal medium for depicting the brushstrokes and flattened forms of his "paintings," he was also interested in developing a means to preserve the spontaneous vitality of the original drawings that served as the basis for these works. "Since no other material would lend itself to strength and delicacy at the same time, I needed to develop a new technique—one that could make spontaneous drawings in steel. Only by laser could it be done. The idea was to make a drawing in steel as though it had just been drawn in some miraculous manner." *Still Life with Fruit, Flowers, and Monica* (1986) is a result of this innovative process. The original quick sketch was enlarged and inscribed in steel by a laser beam. A framed portrait of his model Monica (a fragment of a nude drawing) recalls a traditional Wesselmann prop and serves as a reminder of the evolution of his work.



Tom Wesselmann
Still Life with Fruit, Flowers, and Monica, 1986



Jonathan Borofsky
Man with a Briefcase at 2,968,443, 1986

As new aesthetics replaced Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, artists continued to use the cutout to explore spatial ambiguities as well as a variety of personal concerns. Their eclecticism reflects a decade less constrained by the dictates of style, and more open to the eccentricities of individual vision.

Jonathan Borofsky's dream-inspired imagery defies categorization in any particular school. He developed a repertoire of archetypal images drawn from conscious and unconscious sources. For Borofsky, the cutout represents a shadow—"what's behind what we see out front." High school memories of Platonic theory—this world is a cave in which we see only shadows of the realities in the bright world above—prompted Borofsky to create an ongoing series of what he calls "portable shadows." Often gigantic, and always self-referential, Borofsky's men chatter, hammer, fly, run, and walk with briefcases through his installations. *Man with a Briefcase at 2,968,443* (1986) stands 24 feet tall and is fabricated from fiberglass. He originally conceived it for the dark ceiling of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, where the oddity of a white shadow hanging in space intrigued him. When suspension proved unfeasible, he decided to lean it, as it now stands in this installation—a white shadow cast upon a stone wall. Borofsky derived this particular image from a number of sources, both incidental and psychological. As he was preparing for a 1974 exhibition at the Paula Cooper Gallery, he began to receive sheets of paper in his studio mail slot, inscribed with the names and addresses of famous people. The addresses reminded him of his own numbering system (begun in 1969 with a piece called *Counting from 1 to Infinity*), which registers each work like a coded signature. Borofsky decided to catch the perpetrator, and ran to the door when he heard the mail slot shut. What he saw was a black man walking away carrying a briefcase. "He turned around for a moment, then walked on. I was in bare feet; I didn't run after him." On a psychological level, *Man with a Briefcase* is a self-portrait in which written ideas, drawings and transparencies, and even his brain, are carried like the baggage of a traveling salesman. He compares the briefcase to a computer, a warehouse for the data of his life. *Man with a Briefcase* also extends itself to modern man: the large numbers emblazoned on his chest conjure images of dehumanizing fascist systems or of our own technological society.

Both Borofsky and the Reverend Howard Finster are engaged in a continuous dialogue with the unconscious—with visionary dreams sometimes personal, sometimes



Howard Finster
The Devil's Vice, 1984



Rodney Alan Greenblat
Complaint City, 1983

related to the social and political disposition of the world. Both inscribe their works with numbers, as well as streams of written messages. But unlike Borofsky, Finster is motivated by religious fervor. Ten years ago, at the age of sixty, he dipped his finger into a can of white paint and saw a face appear. He interpreted this as a sign from God that he should create sacred art, and has since made over five thousand paintings, cutouts, and sculptures. Cut from scrap wood and painted with tractor enamel. *The Devil's Vice* (1984), based on a 1977 painting, reveals the artist's obsession with the Apocalypse: a woman is caught in a huge vise covered with prophetic warnings against the evils of drugs and sin.

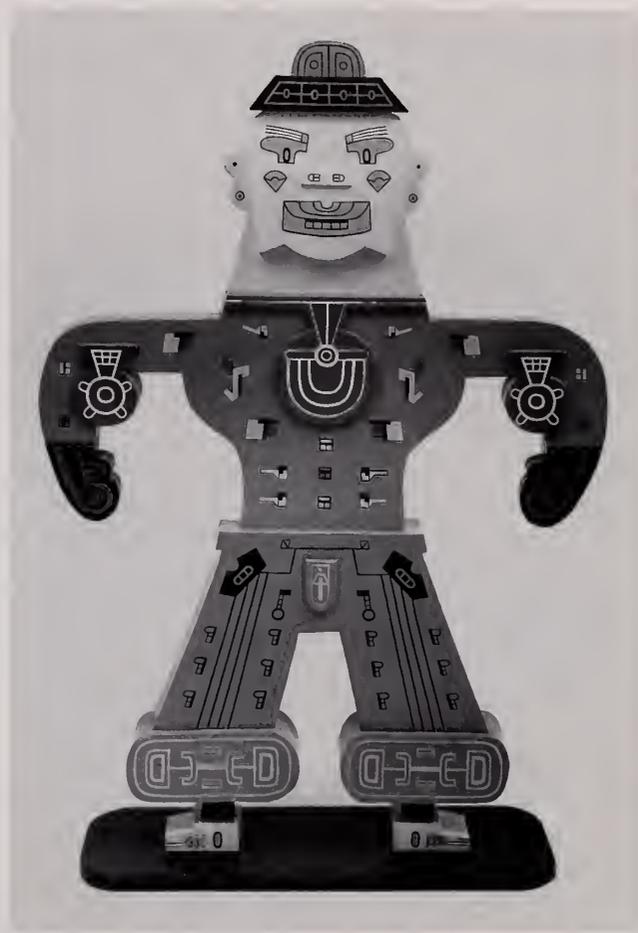
While Finster's art straddles the boundary between fine art and folk art, Rodney Alan Greenblat's work has been described by his dealer, Gracie Mansion, as "folk art from another planet." At twenty-six, Greenblat has developed a cartoon-based style that recalls his obsession with the toys, games, amusement parks, and television shows of his childhood. Like Finster and Borofsky, he incorporates an ongoing written narrative, but while they prophesy, Greenblat jokes. Though similarities can also be found between his "cartooniverse" and the "sculpto-pictoramas" of Red Grooms, Greenblat sees Grooms as a satirist. His own work, he says, is "a stylization of cartoon life. It's my way of envisioning the world, of drawing." Moreover, Greenblat rejects the violent and dramatic comics that inspired Lichtenstein for the whimsy of those created by Hanna-Barbera. He likes "the idea of making happy decorative art." In drawing class he "couldn't help putting funny eyes in—something to bring the figure to life." Yet, he is also intrigued with the idea of building up cutout shapes to create "different layers of reality, illusionistic perspective, and lots of space made from flat planes." *Complaint City* (1983) is an anthropomorphic billboard—a flat cutout with feet and a head that asks, "What's Wrong With You?" The sign itself is constructed from layered cutouts of Fluffy the cat and Fido the dog holding complaint lists in their paws. In the midst of popular East Village eateries, the Complaint Department Coffee Shop advertises, "We have really bad food." "I put in everything that was bugging me," Greenblat explains, "including New Yorkers' preoccupation with complaining all the time."

If Rodney Alan Greenblat's work can be seen as "folk art from another planet," Karl Wirsum's is the folk art of commercial middle America. His vision is rooted in childhood memories of the 1940s and early 1950s—a large collection of games, tin and plastic toys, robots, promo-

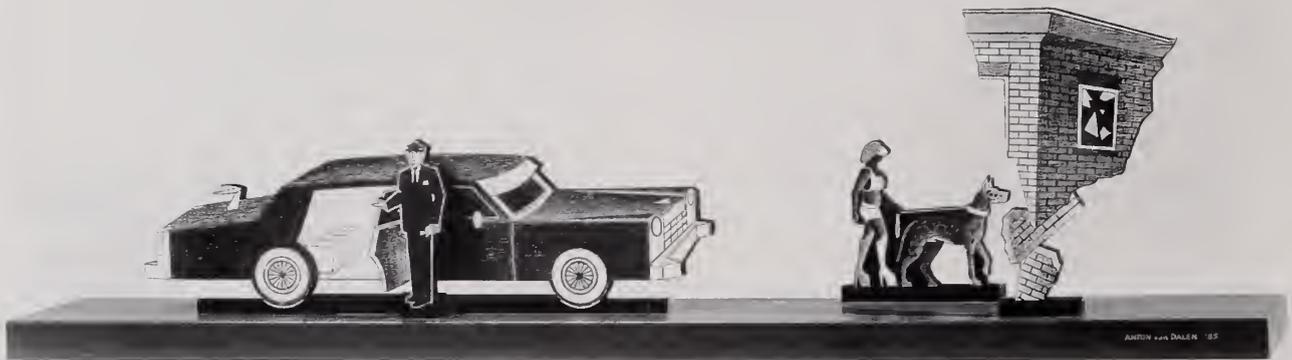
tional trinkets, and the often grotesque items of the gift trades, such as a Charley McCarthy head with movable plastic eyes. Wirsum, who made his first cutouts in the early 1970s, finds it significant that he and Bugs Bunny are the same age, and shares with Greenblat a predilection for cartoon characters. *Ramon* (1978) evolved from a joke about realist painting. "This was my realist work in terms of it being like a real pull toy. The wheels are underwater, but there's no boat attached to the strings." Ramon, the surfer/skier, is painted like a hot rod, but only moves when the string is pulled. *Brown Derby Bouncer* (1983) recalls advertising dummy boards that are displayed in store windows or project out from buildings. The title refers to the Los Angeles club that is frequented by celebrities, while the figure bears a strong resemblance to a set of interlocking toy men that Wirsum played with as a boy.

The merging of a childhood aesthetic with adult social and artistic concerns has also been a motivating factor for Anton Van Dalen. "My cutout interest belongs to my childhood, when I either made my own out of 1/4 inch plywood or . . . bought scenes of armies at war printed on paper with perforated edges to be pressed out and played with. With a minimum of materials, a whole world could be alluded to. The cutouts I do today are a compilation of everything I tried to do as a child, born during wartime in Holland." In 1972, Van Dalen began to adapt his highly stylized, cartoonlike drawings to the cutout format, creating black and white tableaux of his Lower East Side neighborhood. As a European, he had difficulty relating to the urban war that raged there during the 1970s and felt like a voyeur. Burning buildings, prostitution, open trafficking in drugs, and the violence of daily life formed the basis for his imagery. In *Avenue A* (1985), Van Dalen observes the evolution of his own street, as galleries and condominiums gradually gentrify the East Village. The individual elements of the scenes have been reduced over the years to "emblems" representing aspects of street life: the limo, an emblem for New York City luxury; the falling building, for changing neighborhoods; the woman with the Great Dane, for the public nature of sexuality.

William Mutter's cutout portraits of wrestlers began two years ago, when he saw a dummy board advertisement for a Hulk Hogan video. Attracted by its strong visual impact, throwaway quality, and Pop associations, he soon made the transition from the painting to the cutout. Like Wirsum, Mutter is inspired by the bizarre underside of American culture. His heroes are outsiders—wrestlers and monsters whose flamboyant appearance makes them visually arresting. *Mil Mascaras* (1985) depicts one of



Karl Wirsum
Brown Derby Bouncer, 1983

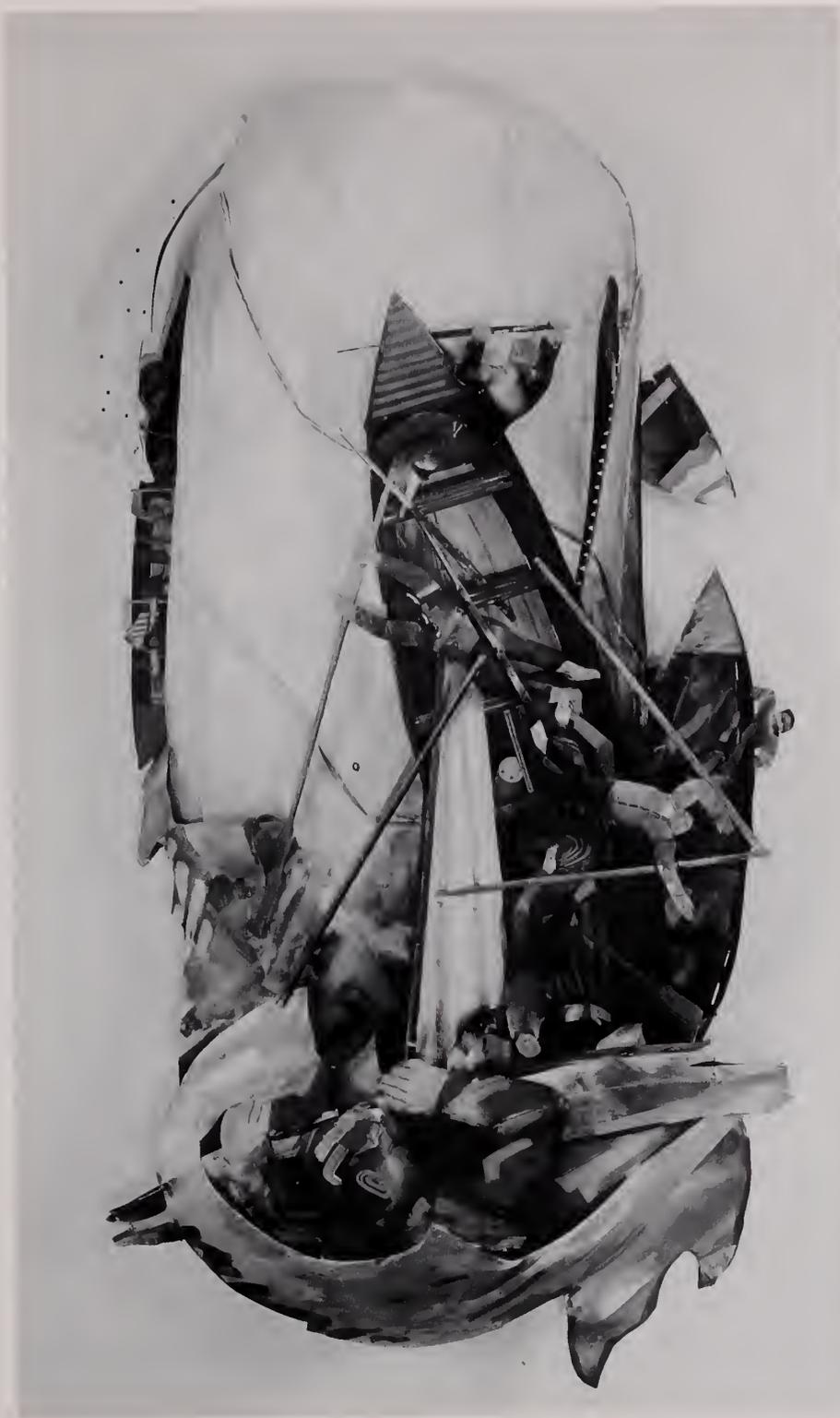


Anton Van Dalen
Avenue A, 1985

wrestling's few "good-guys," the Mexican whose trademark is his "thousand masks." Mutter sees the sport as poor man's theater, which relies on the same clearly defined roles of good and evil that distinguish cartoons and comics.

The toylike quality of Timothy Woodman's painted aluminum reliefs belies their somber message. While Van Dalen's naive imagery makes pointed commentaries on the nature of urban life, Woodman addresses broader issues of human evil. Inspired by the nineteenth-century novels of Hawthorne and Melville, he applies their dark views to the modern world. *Search* (1985) conjures up frightening

images of kidnapping and child brutality. In *Moby Dick* (1985), Woodman portrays the obsessive passion of Melville's novel in a turbulent battle between men and a whale. He relates the simplicity of his cutout forms to the style of the authors he emulates, citing their ability to delve into deep waters with clear, direct language. For Woodman, the cutout provides the means of combining painting, drawing, and planar sculpture, as well as the opportunity to experiment with distortions of perspective and scale.



Timothy Woodman
Moby Dick, 1985



Judith Shea
Tank, 1980



William Mutter
Mil Mascaras, 1985

David Montgomery and Judith Shea are anomalies in the current art scene. Neither employs narrative, decoration, social commentary, emotional upheaval, or cool Postmodernist doctrine. Although their choice of materials reflects disparate tastes, the integrity of those materials is crucial to both. Neither paint nor decoration alters the surface in any way. Both artists use simple construction methods and flat forms to depict aspects of the female figure. Surprisingly, they share a common interest in clothing, particularly the tank suit. For Montgomery, it adds color and texture, while for Shea, it stands alone to describe the form. The primitive, folk quality of Montgomery's cutouts is evoked by his use of scrap metal, sometimes rusted, sometimes still bearing the original paint. But Montgomery's inspiration comes from more traditional sources, such as Picasso's early sculpture and an interest in classical antiquity. He equates the peeling, decaying quality of Rome's buildings with the metal he finds at junkyards and demolition sites; he also perceives in a headless bronze warrior in the Vatican striking affinities to his own headless, limbless figures, not only in appearance, but in the thin metal from which both works are constructed.

Female Torso #6 (1985) verges on abstraction, while his untitled figure of 1986 recalls the pose and gesture of an Archaic Greek sculpture. Judith Shea's work is informed by more modern sources. The stark flat shapes are Minimalist in their simplicity, but represent the clothing forms that she has dealt with all her life. Shea carried the visual image of the pattern with her in her transition from fashion design to fine art. *Tank* (1980) is a commanding image—an archetypal silhouette of a female torso, cut from silk organza.

The cutout, with its hard edge to define shape and its inherent perceptual illusionism, continues to recall the confrontational impact of its commercial predecessors. But today the cutout has evolved to accommodate the varied concerns of a new generation. No longer reflecting the Pop culture of the 1960s, the cutout asserts its place in contemporary art, not only as an art object, but as an icon of our time.

SUSAN LUBOWSKY



David Montgomery
Untitled, 1986

Checklist

Dimensions are in inches: height precedes width precedes depth. An asterisk indicates that a work is exhibited in the Museum's Sculpture Court.

- Jonathan Borofsky (b. 1943)**
**Man with a Briefcase at 2,968,443*, 1986
Epoxy enamel on fiberglass, 288 x 48 x 3
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
- Howard Finster (b. 1919)**
President Roosevelt, 1983
Enamel on wood, 11½ x 9¼ x 3½
Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York
The Devil's Vice, 1984
Enamel on wood, 18 x 16
Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York
Youth of Abraham, 1985
Enamel on wood, 77 x 17½
Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York
- Rodney Alan Greenblat (b. 1960)**
Complaint City, 1983
Acrylic on wood and board, 37 x 23 x 2¾
Collection of Laura Skoler
Nightbird Clock, 1986
Mixed media, 35 x 21¼ x 3
Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York
- Red Grooms (b. 1937)**
Million Dollar Flag, 1980–81
Alkyd paint on cardboard, 34¼ x 44¼
Collection of Richard S. LeFrak
Charlie's Pirate Ship, 1985
Ink and litho crayon on paper, 48¼ x
49½ x 22½
Marlborough Gallery, New York
- Alex Katz (b. 1927)**
**Coleman Pond*, 1975
Oil on aluminum, 94⅞ x 162 x 21
Robert Miller Gallery, New York
Ada (Black and White Dress), 1980
Oil on aluminum, 69¼ x 4
Mira Goddard Gallery, Toronto
- Rudy**, 1980
Oil on aluminum, 71 x 10
Collection of the artist
Sunny, 1982
Oil on aluminum, 34 x 34½
Robert Miller Gallery, New York
Bathers (Vincent and Anastasia), 1984
Oil on aluminum, 68 x 45
Robert Miller Gallery, New York
- Roy Lichtenstein (b. 1923)**
**Picture and Pitcher*, 1977
Urethane on bronze, 95 x 40 x 24½
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo;
Edmund Hayes and Charles Clifton
Funds
**Three Brushstrokes*, 1984
Urethane on aluminum, 121 x 32 x 46
Collection of the artist
- David Montgomery (b. 1944)**
Female Torso #6, 1985
Copper and sheet metal, 50 x 42½ x 21½
Edward Thorp Gallery, New York
Untitled, 1986
Copper and sheet metal, 40 x 36
The Prudential Life Insurance Company
of America, Newark
- William Mutter (b. 1945)**
Mil Mascaras, 1985
Acrylic on foam core, 96 x 66 x 20
Collection of the artist
- Larry Rivers (b. 1923)**
Birds of the Northeast, 1985–86
Oil on canvas mounted on foam core,
58 x 80
Marlborough Gallery, New York
An Old Sicilian Story, 1985–86
Oil on canvas mounted on foam core,
39 x 119 x 79
Marlborough Gallery, New York
- Judith Shea (b. 1948)**
Tank, 1980
Silk organza and wood, 25¾ x 14½
Willard Gallery, New York
- Anton Van Dalen (b. 1938)**
Avenue A, 1985
Pencil and gesso on wood, 12⅞ x
47¼ x 5½
Edward Thorp Gallery, New York
- Tom Wesselmann (b. 1931)**
Still Life with Fruit, Flowers, and Monica,
1986
Enamel on steel, 57 x 86
Sidney Janis Gallery, New York
Still Life with Petunias, Lilies, and Fruit,
1986
Enamel on aluminum, 72 x 94
Sidney Janis Gallery, New York
- Karl Wirsum (b. 1939)**
Ramon, 1978
Acrylic on wood, 21 x 17 x 10
Collection of Roger Brown
Brown Derby Bouncer, 1983
Acrylic on wood, 45 x 31 x 7¾
Collection of Bill and Lucinda McClain
- Timothy Woodman (b. 1952)**
Moby Dick, 1985
Oil on aluminum, 73 x 38 x 13½
The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis
Search, 1985
Oil on aluminum, 45 x 46 x 14
Zabriskie Gallery, New York
-
- Photographs by D. James Dee (Wesselmann), Ken Showell (Mutter), Dorothy Zeidman (Lichtenstein), Zindman/Fremont (Katz, Montgomery).

**Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris**
120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017

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