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By Lonely, Difficult Evolutions . . .

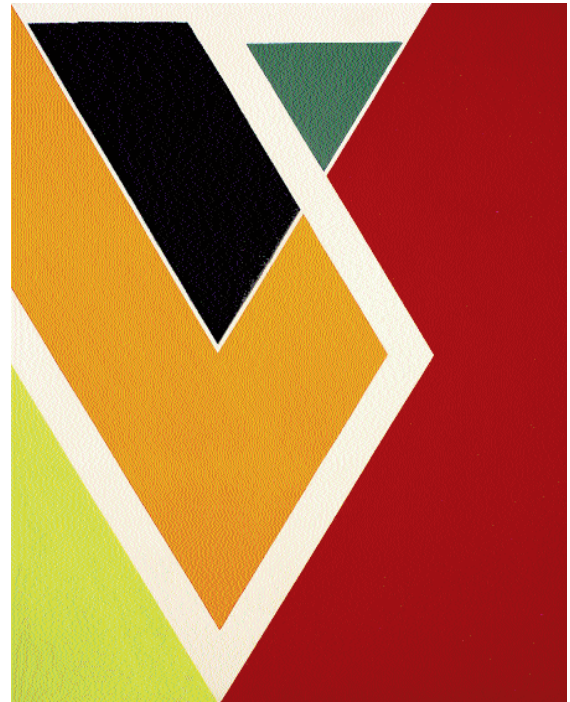
BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

LARRY ZOX, Sol Lewitt and Lowell Nesbitt are as arbitrary a selection of artists currently showing as one could safely hope to make, even in the middle of this particularly varied and rousing season. Zox is a graduate *cum laude* of the Post-Painterly Abstraction school, department of Color Painting. Lewitt is among the driest and most cerebral of Primary Structurists. And Nesbitt is a practitioner of the resurgent representational painting. What they have in common is their relative youth, the still-emerging status of their reputations, and their shared taste for austerities of one kind or another, the certificate of their contemporaneity. Considered together, they may suggest the various vitality of recent American art.

Larry Zox, at the Kornblee, gives the lie to the notion that the new abstraction must necessarily be cold and formalistic. He is one painter who shows an ability to play by the rules without cramping at all an essentially romantic and exuberant sensibility. Like his confreres in the school of color painting, he works in series, making only slight adjustments in format while running a gamut of color variations. Also conventionally, he indulges such affectations as not erasing penciled guidelines, leaving the sides unframed, and tolerating the occasional slight blotching of edges--all to emphasize the "object-ness" of the work, in case we had doubted it. And his use of color is circumspectly "anti-pictorial," absolutely flat on the surface.

What makes Zox different is the way he adapts these didactic means to personal, intensely lyric ends. Having accepted the constrictions of minimalist dogma, he permits himself every conceivable freedom in such matters as format, color selection and paint medium. The motif of his new, and perhaps most beautiful, series--"Diamond Drill"--is bold and rakish, full of big, emphatic zigs and zags, and incorporates the really sublime device of leaving swaths of blank canvas, of varying widths, to separate the color areas. This innovation allows, in turn, the simultaneous presence on one canvas of colors which, if directly juxtaposed, would look awful--oranges, maroons, greens, grays, reds and yellows, in dizzying varieties of "acid," "cosmetic," and "sour." Zox also avails himself of the wealth of effects made possible by new paints--the shiny patina of epoxies, the lovely "drenched" look of some acrylics. Again, all on the same canvas. The result of such lavish, daring execution, within straitened circumstances, is a feeling of improvisation and fortuitous balance something like that of jazz. Maybe Mondrian, in attempting "Broadway Boogie Woogie," was dreaming of Larry Zox.

No one is likely to dream about Sol Lewitt. Confronting his work--so canny, intelligent, and cold--is an occupation reserved for the decidedly wide-awake mind. The main interest in Lewitt's new show at the Dwan is a room-filling arrangement, in rows, of chest-high, white-painted metal columns, each incorporating three cubes. These cubes come in three varieties: closed, open on one side, and open on opposite sides. Also on display are a series of working sketches, diagrams, and computation sheets, and a tabletop model, documenting the progress of the finished product from its original conception and suggesting that the result is only one of many possibilities. The esthetics of all this are, indeed, minimal. The sketches are messy, the diagrams have snappy titles like "21



Larry Zox's *Diamond Drill*

variations in Which Cube No. 3 Is Predominant," and the final work is too low and self-contained to be seriously "environmental," except for pygmies. But effect is obviously not Lewitt's interest. What he is offering with this show is a sort of specimen of the creative process, turning art, as it were, inside out for our scrutiny. As an experience, Lewitt's work is astringent, to say the most. As an essay on esthetic brinkmanship, it is both instructive and engaging.

From these arcane delights to Lowell Nesbitt's oil paintings of studio interiors (at the Stable) would seem quite a jump, but Nesbitt's ascetic realism and Lewitt's brainy puritanism bear a certain spiritual kinship. Nesbitt, like Zox, simply maintains a more direct line to the "modern" past, in this case the impeccability of Sheeler combined with some of the delicate ambiguity of Demuth, recast in a tough new mold. Nesbitt is best known for his severe, exclusively black-and-white close-ups of building facades and of objects in interiors under strong direct light. The suspicion of surrealism that hovers in those heavily shadowed and shadowy pictures is somewhat dissipated in the present series, which depicts the studios of seven artist-friends and also marks Nesbitt's first consistent use of color--pale and acidic hues and tints. Traces of mysteriousness do remain, and the studios, though full of a kind of winter light, are airless (you get the feeling that their owners are either deceased or out of town on long trips). However, all in all, there is a sense of growing confidence in these new works. Nesbitt appears to be cautiously opening up his formerly hermetic view to include color and the real world, though in measured doses. If Larry Zox may be said to infuse new forms with old feelings, Lowell Nesbitt might be seen as finding new feelings for old subject matter. In any case, it is by lonely, difficult evolutions such as these that art demonstrates its capacity to vindicate itself in the face of change.