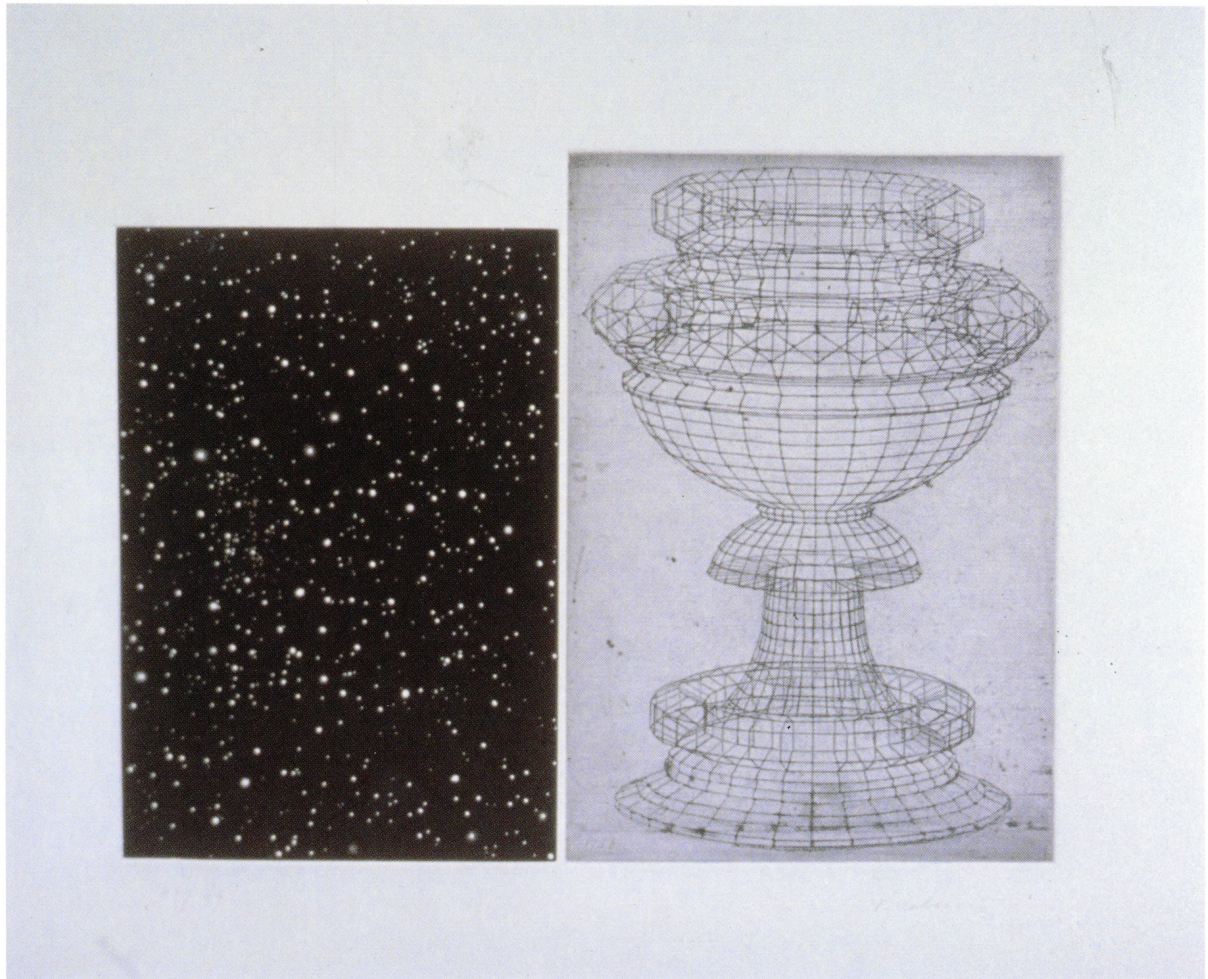


CONTEMPORARY REALIST ART
FROM THE COLLECTION OF

MELLON BANK



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Front Cover Vija Celmins
Constellation-Uccello, 1982
aquatint with soft ground

CONTEMPORARY REALIST ART
FROM THE COLLECTION OF
MELLON BANK

Essay by
Stanley I Grand

August 25 to September 28, 1997

Sordoni Art Gallery • Wilkes University • Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania



1 Vija Celmins
Ocean Surface 1, 1982
drypoint

FOREWORD

WE ARE PLEASED TO JOIN the Sordoni Art Gallery in presenting "Contemporary Realist Art from the Collection of Mellon Bank." The corporate art collection of Mellon Bank was established to enhance the workplace for the enjoyment of our employees and customers, while bringing an important cultural and educational asset to those areas we serve. By lending works of art to museums and galleries, our intention is to increase an awareness of the visual arts and their place in our cultural—and corporate—heritage.

This exhibition includes a selection of contemporary American paintings and prints from Mellon Bank's collection. The collection, which initially consisted of a small body of nineteenth-century paintings, was carefully supplemented in the early 1980s with British and American works of the same period. The contemporary works were added to bring the collection into the twentieth century and to reinforce the connection between Mellon Bank and modern, innovative ways of doing business. "Contemporary Realist Art from the Collection of Mellon Bank" enables us to share an important part of our collection with the community and to celebrate the achievements of a distinguished group of artists.

We are grateful to art consultant Jane Richards for her commitment to selecting works of the highest quality. Her efforts continue to play a key role in the development and use of this collection.

All of us at Mellon Bank take great pride in sharing this portion of our collection and hope that you find pleasure, insight, and understanding in this exhibition.

—Frank V. Cahouet
Chairman, President, and
Chief Executive Officer
Mellon Bank Corporation

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2 Jennifer Bartlett
In the Garden #118, 1982
silkscreen

DURING A SEVEN-YEAR PERIOD beginning in 1980, Mellon Bank actively developed a corporate art collection, which at present contains approximately 3,000 works. Building on its preexisting holdings of nineteenth-century American paintings, the Bank expanded its collection of traditional paintings and historic prints, while simultaneously moving into other collecting areas. The Mellon family's longstanding interest in British art pointed toward another collecting direction: British paintings, watercolours, and drawings from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Reflecting the Bank's strong position in the international business sector, the collection increasingly assumed a global aspect—textiles, in particular, being well represented. Finally, the Bank purchased contemporary art, primarily works on paper, from which the current exhibition is drawn.

Several considerations contributed to and influenced the growth and development of Mellon's art collection, which coincided with a significant expansion of its consumer base and a concurrent increase in its physical facilities. Obviously, the collection fulfilled internal and external needs, but it also reflects certain ideas current during the time in which it was created. Specifically, these factors include the broader trend of corporate collecting, the art market during the 1980s, and—since this exhibition deals with representational art—the growing acceptance of “New Realism” during the 1980s.

Internally, the collection was utilized as a means of improving the workplace by creating a “pleasant and stimulating environment for employees and customers.”¹ Not only did art add “color and beauty to the work spaces,” it also demonstrated management's concern for employees: “Unlike most corporate collections, which are exclusive to senior management, Mellon Bank designed its program to function in a highly democratic manner [which] demonstrates to employees that the Corporation cares about their work environment.” Last, the collection was to serve as an “informal educational tool,” a way to

1. The quotations in this and the following paragraph are from an undated document entitled “Mellon Bank Corporate Art Collection Fact Sheet.”

enrich and broaden employees' personal lives. This concern with the quality of the work environment was consistent with the thinking of contemporary personnel and motivational experts.

Externally, Mellon understood the collection's public relations and marketing value: "The art collection is strategically utilized as a means to position Mellon Bank in a leadership role within the cultural community and to promote corporate citizenship within highly demanding communities. The art collection's high caliber enables it to be utilized in a way that serves to strengthen the Bank's image and community involvement in an increasingly competitive marketplace." In management's view, the "quality and enduring value" of the art were "qualities that match Mellon's business activity." Thus, the evolving collection was seen as having a role in the advancement of corporate objectives.

The "increasingly competitive marketplace" reflected the boom years of the 1980s, which presented both great opportunities and uncertainties. As the banking industry struggled to redefine itself, corporate art collections helped convey an image of stability, tradition, taste, and responsibility. But then this has often been the case: one thinks of the Florentine Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492), who understood well the use of art to further his family's banking interests.

The development of the Mellon collection should also be seen in the wider context of corporate collecting and specifically within the heating up of the art market during the 1980s. A relatively recent phenomenon, contemporary corporate art collecting began during the Depression years of the 1930s when, as Marjory Jacobson has noted, the Rockefeller Center real estate group and International Business Machines pioneered the "modern precedents for American business involvement in the visual arts."² The former, following centuries-old traditions of patronage, commissioned Diego Rivera to paint a mural for its midtown flagship property; the latter, under the leadership of Thomas J. Watson, Sr., effected the "transformation of the accepted mode of art collecting established by nineteenth-century moguls into major company policy."³

In the 1980s, the art market became one repository for surplus capital, a way to diversify one's investments and minimize risk. For example, when the British Rail Pension Fund sold its Impressionist and modern pictures at auction in 1989, the Fund realized an annual

2. Marjory Jacobson, *Art for Work: The New Renaissance in Corporate Collecting* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1993): 10.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 12.



3 Janet Fish
Autumn Leaves and Canteloupe, 1982
pastel on paper

increase in value exceeding 20 percent on many of these paintings. The possibility of selling trophy pictures like van Gogh's *Iris* (which fetched \$53.9 million) or *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (\$82.5 million) offered the potential of bringing instant fame and prestige to the paintings' new owners and of providing stockholders with an outstanding return on investment.

Broadly speaking, most of the artists on view in this exhibition were associated with New Realism, one of the many—and often intersecting—stylistic directions (Minimalism, Pop, Op, Process, Site, Earth, Conceptual Art, Hard Edge Abstraction, Photo-Realism, Kinetic, and Happenings) that flourished during the 1960s. The prior decade had witnessed less formal diversity; indeed, many critics would have agreed with Clement Greenberg's 1954 observation "that representational painting and sculpture have rarely achieved more than minor quality in recent years, and that major quality gravitates more and more toward the nonrepresentational."⁴ "Quality," however, is an elusive concept. By 1961, Greenberg had come to believe that "standards of quality" were directly tied to an art's "purity," by which he meant that the artist must "eliminate . . . every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by . . . any other art."⁵ Since representational painting shares subject matter, narrative, and illusionism with other arts, it was inherently of lesser aesthetic quality in Greenberg's formalistic hierarchy.

The artist and critic Fairfield Porter (Catalogue Numbers 23 and 24) represented a notable and eloquent dissenting viewpoint from Greenberg's. In 1962, Porter, a long-time advocate of figurative and representational art who had written for *Art News* (1951–1959) and *The Nation* (1959–1961), wrote: "To say that you cannot paint the figure today, is like an architectural critic saying that you must not use ornament, or as if a literary critic proscribed reminiscence."⁶ Subsequently, an increasing number of critics favorably inclined toward representational art began forcefully arguing its case.⁷

4. Greenberg expressed this view in a lecture originally delivered at Yale University and subsequently published as "Abstract, Representational, and so forth" (1954) in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1961): 135.

5. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook 4* (1961): 103.

6. Fairfield Porter, *Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism 1935-1975*, edited by Rackstraw Downes (New York, 1979): 70.

7. For an overview of the critical response to the realist revival, see Lawrence Alloway, "The Renewal of Realist Criticism," *Art in America* (September 1981): 108-111.



4 Sidney Goodman
East River Drive, 1979
oil on canvas

Concurrently, several important museum and gallery exhibitions, along with their accompanying catalogues and reviews, served to focus and clarify the revival of representational painting and bestow legitimacy on it. The Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA's) seminal "New Images of Man" (1959) exhibition recognized figurative art as a powerful, contemporary means of expression. Guest curator Peter Selz argued that in response to "solitude and anxiety . . . anguish and dread . . . these new imagists take the human situation, indeed the human predicament rather than formal structure, as their starting point."⁸ Three years later, MoMA hosted another important exhibition titled "Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure" (1962). Selected from more than 9,500 entries, the show highlighted the increasing interest in figurative painting. Several commercial spaces, including the Kornblee Gallery and the Downtown Gallery, organized figurative exhibitions to coincide with MoMA's exhibition.

During the 1960s, three additional exhibitions significantly furthered the cause of the new representational art: "Realism Now" (1968) at Vassar College, "Report on the Sixties" (1969) at the Denver Museum, and "Directions 2: Aspects of a New Realism" (1969) at the Milwaukee Art Center.⁹ By the time the Whitney Museum of American Art's "22 Realists" (1970) opened, pluralism had replaced the once unchallenged dominance of abstract art. Putting the change in perspective, Alvin Martin observed that whereas Barbara Rose in her *American Art Since 1900* (1967) had devoted only one paragraph to post-World War II realism, Sam Hunter, a mere five years later, gave the subject half a chapter in his *American Art of the Twentieth Century*.¹⁰

In sum, by the early 1980s, when Mellon Bank began collecting contemporary representational art, Greenberg's belief in the supremacy of abstract art had been supplanted by other critical viewpoints.¹¹ Moreover, unlike the often hermetic abstract art,

8. Peter Selz, *New Images of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959): 11.

9. Linda Nochlin wrote a catalogue essay for the Vassar exhibition, and Sidney Tillim contributed an essay to the Milwaukee survey. In different ways each attempted to analyze and direct the movement.

10. Alvin Martin, *Real, Really Real, Super Real* (San Antonio, Texas: San Antonio Museum Association, 1981): 20.

11. Three important exhibitions, and their accompanying catalogues, further solidified the critical acceptance of New Realism: "Realism/Photo-realism" (1980) at the Philbrook Art Center, the San Antonio Museum



5 Richard Haas
View Through Sun Room, Haas House, 1983
watercolor

representational art had, in the words of Mellon curator Jane Richards, a "broad appeal," which was important to the Bank.

The broad appeal of New Realism stemmed, in part, from its variety of aesthetic choices. As Frank Goodyear observed, "most important, at the root of realism's pluralism, is the realization that contemporary realism is not an art movement per se and thus shared ideas may be few."¹² Thus realism can look both to the past as well as to the future: "it reflects both a revisionist and an avant-garde bias. Contemporary realism cannot be understood in any other sense, encompassing as it does the complexities and contradictions of contemporary life."¹³ Unlike the nineteenth-century Realism of a Gustave Courbet, "contemporary American realism," in Goodyear's view, represents "two radically different aesthetics—one a commitment to the value of phenomenological information as the basis of art, the other an affirmation of the process and value of its translation into pictorial information."¹⁴ In terms of this exhibition, Goodyear's synthesis and position were especially important since they helped define New Realism during the period when Mellon was actively collecting. The subsequent contextualization of much figurative art within a post-modern perspective did not effectively influence the direction of the collection.

The aesthetic options noted by Goodyear are well represented in the current exhibition. "Phenomenological information"—art based on a careful study of the object as it appears optically—is seen in Janet Fish's meticulous still lifes (Figure 3). Although Fish worked from direct observation, others, like photorealist Richard Haas (Figure 5), painted from photographs. Filtering the perceived subject through a mechanical medium reflects a modern sensibility shared by many other artists who employ photographs or photographic ways of seeing. Although he does not work from photographs, Philip Pearlstein's compositions (Figure 8) frequently suggest the camera's often arbitrary cropping.

Association's "Real, Really Real, Super Real" (1981), and The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts' exhibition "Contemporary American Realism since 1960" (1981), with an important catalogue by Frank Goodyear that provided the most comprehensive survey of the phenomenon to date.

12. Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., *Contemporary American Realism since 1960* (Boston: New York Graphic Society and The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1981): 9.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 32.



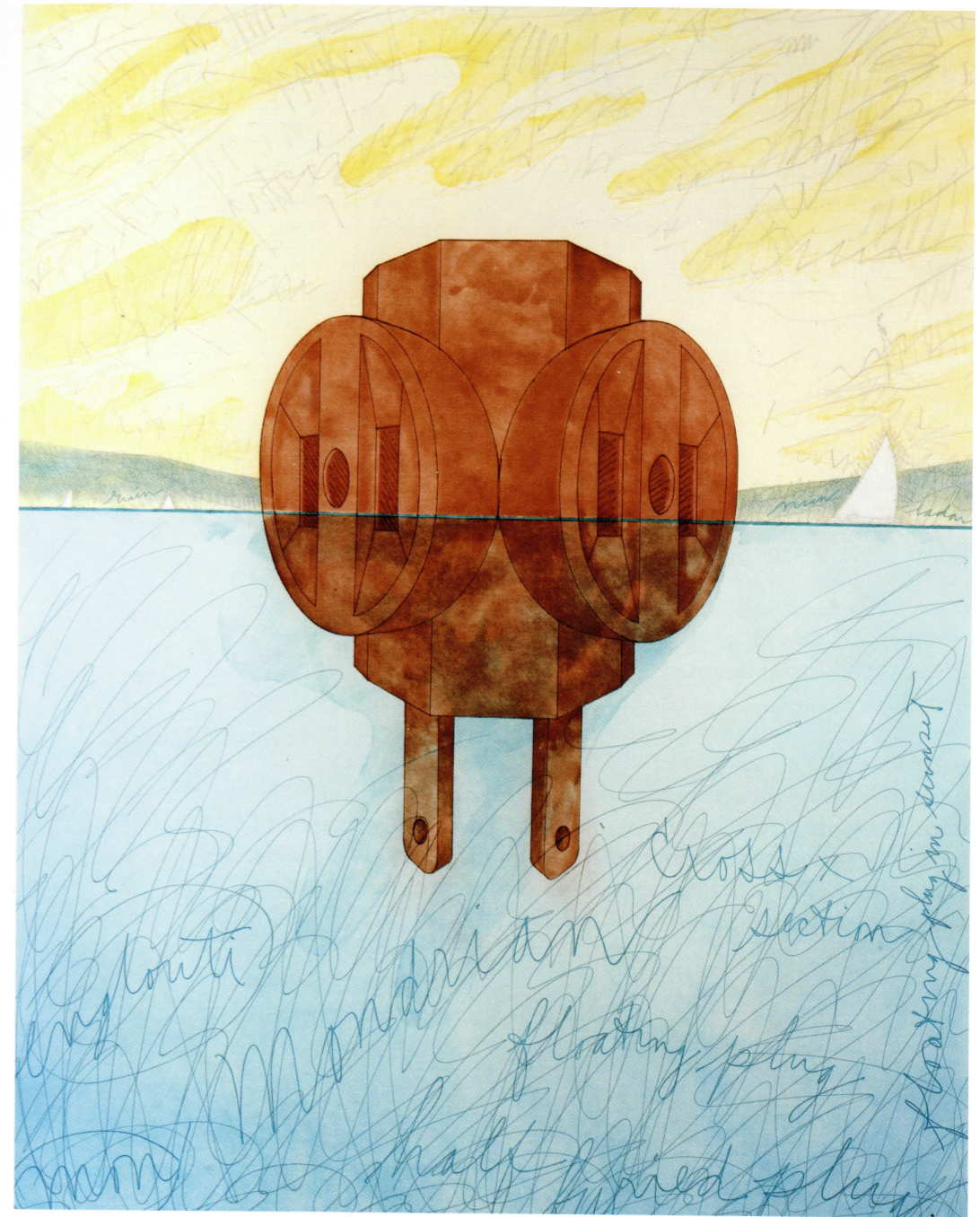
6 John Moore
Light Manufacturing, 1984
oil on board

Many other artists, however, rejected the mechanical aesthetic and smooth surface associated with “straight” photography, an aesthetic that eliminates all evidence of the artist’s hand. For these artists, many of whom had begun their careers during the heyday of “action painting” as Harold Rosenberg characterized Abstract Expressionism, the gesture was of paramount importance. Jennifer Bartlett’s painterly garden scene (Figure 2) or Sidney Goodman’s expressive landscape (Figure 4) clearly grow out of this tradition. For both Bartlett and Goodman, the formalistic concerns of process, surface, tactility, and materials remain central—as they do in James Weeks’s loosely painted but tightly designed composition (Figure 12).

The advent of Pop Art, with its cool, ironic, deadpan imagery derived from commercial products and rendered in an impersonal manner as if by a machine, represents both an assault on formalistic values and traditional subject matter. In terms of the latter, Pop Art represents the final rejection of History Painting, the high art of the Renaissance and Baroque eras. Didactic and moralistic in intent, History Painting was serious: it treated allegorical and narrative subjects, drawn primarily from the Bible or the Classics, in the Grand Manner; that is, in a manner appropriate to the *gravitas* of the subject matter. Landscapes, portraits, still lifes, views, or genre paintings, on the other hand, occupied a considerably lower place on the aesthetic totem pole. The successful assault on this standard commenced in the nineteenth century, when critics like the poet Charles Baudelaire urged artists to paint the “heroism of modern life” and reject the timeworn scenes and incidents from the antique. The triumph of the Impressionists over the Academy, where the old History Painting still ruled, ushered in the modern era and broadened the number of acceptable subjects for serious art to consider.

For Pop artist Claes Oldenburg a three-way plug absurdly floating on quiet water (Figure 7) is as valid a subject as the Apollo Belvedere. Although today Pop artists are not seen as New Realists, the lines were more blurred initially: when the Sidney Janis Gallery mounted “New Realists,” an important 1962 exhibition, most of the exhibitors were Pop artists. This ambiguity is seen in the career of West Coast artist Wayne Thiebaud, perhaps best known for his thickly painted cakes, pies, and other confections, but who also created vertiginous cityscapes inspired by the streets of San Francisco (Figure 10). Ed Ruscha combines Pop imagery with punning texts to create witty contemporary icons (Figure 9).

Just as the Pop artists reacted against Abstract Expressionism’s “tragic and timeless” themes, the Minimalists rejected the action painters’ exuberance. The refined seascapes of Vija Celmins (Figure 1)



7 Claes Oldenburg
Floating Three Way Plug, 1976
 etching and aquatint

or the spare landscapes of James Turrell (Figure 11) exemplify the figurative component of the “less is more” aesthetic. The reductive aesthetic, with its roots in the Precisionism of Charles Sheeler and others, is seen also in the simplified forms and flat colors of Alex Katz (Catalogue Number 13), who had begun his career working in an Abstract Expressionist manner.

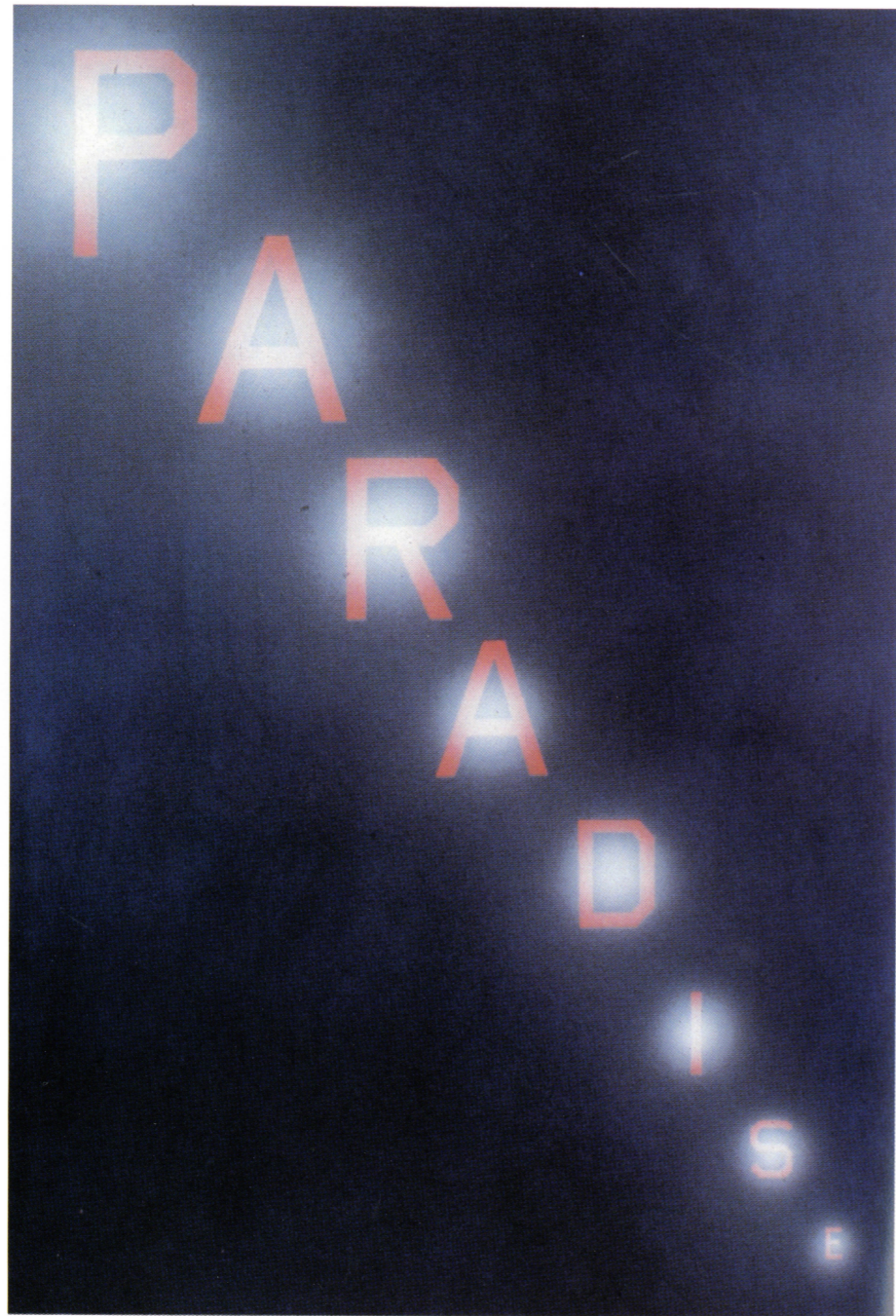
In the art world as elsewhere, every action seems to have a reaction. Rejecting the irony of Pop and the asceticism of Minimalism, artists such as Jack Beal (Catalogue Number 2) have striven earnestly to reinfuse art with sincerity and meaning accessible to all. In retrospect, his efforts are a harbinger of the debate on inclusiveness that has attracted so much critical attention in the 1990s. John Moore’s cityscape (Figure 6) likewise reflects a traditional approach to his subject.

New Realism’s strength and broad appeal result from its heterogeneous nature. Most important, the reintroduction of recognizable subject matter did not mean a renunciation of Modernism. Rather, many artists combined modernist perspectives with the larger art historical tradition. Thirty-five years ago, George A. Kubler, in *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, noted that the pace of formal innovation in the visual arts was likely to decrease. The century that had witnessed the rapid succession of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and so on could no longer continue to develop at the same pace. Kubler’s prescient concept of an “archaeology” of visual imagery—whereby artists turn increasingly to the art historical tradition as they focus more on *what* they want to say instead of *how* to say it—seriously undermined the romantic notion of a perennial avant-garde. The art in this exhibition comes from the historical period when the implications of this insight were first beginning to be understood.

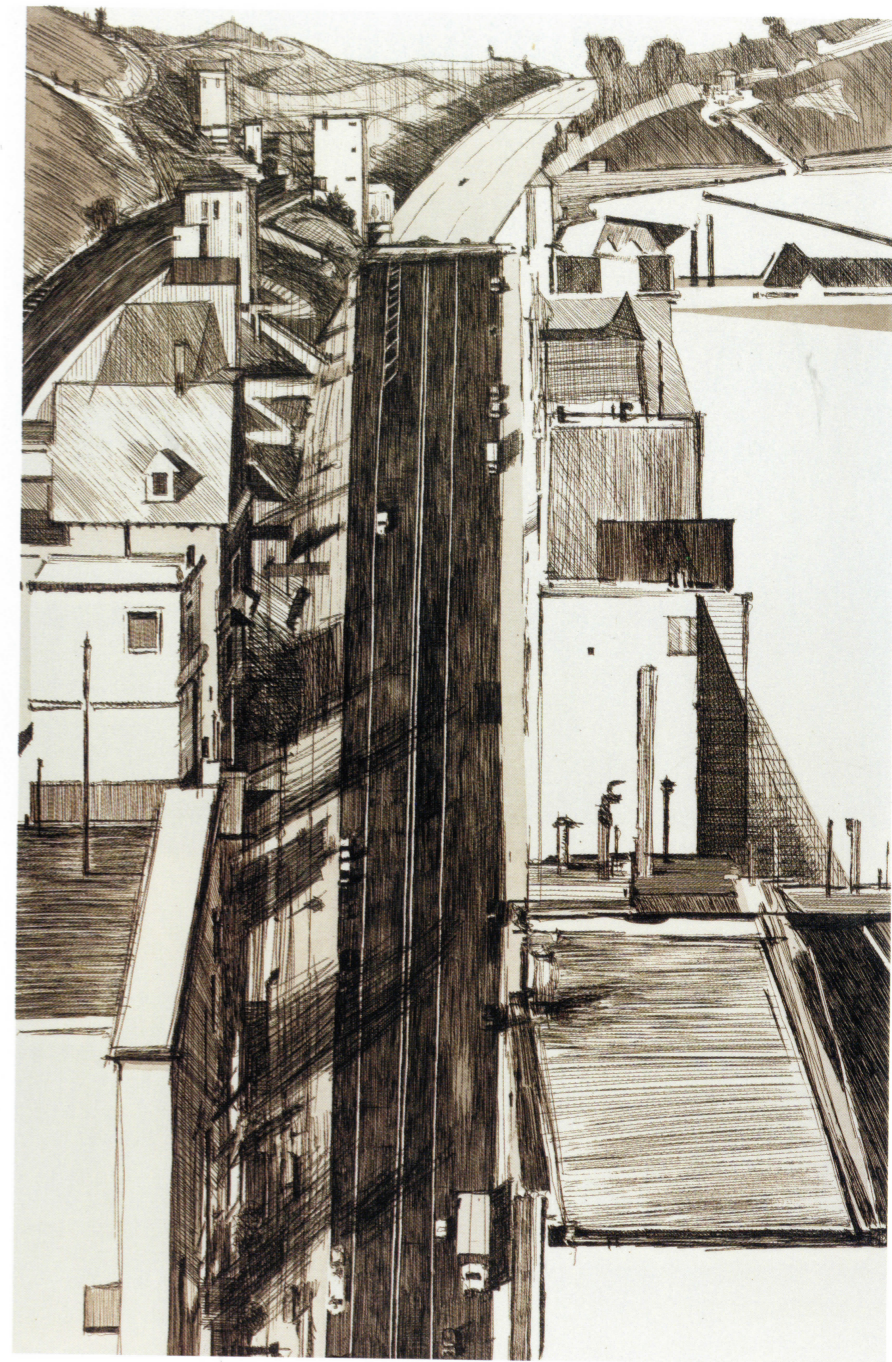
—Stanley I Grand
Wilkes University



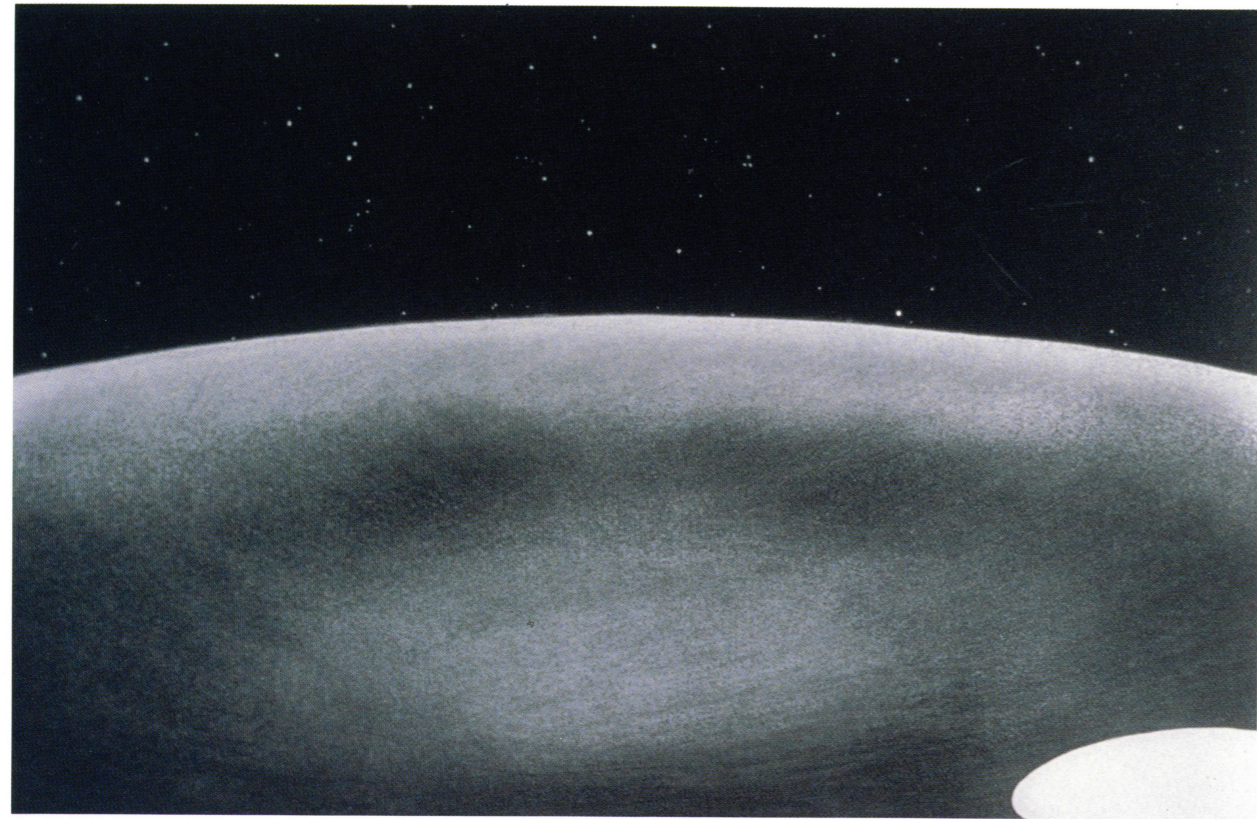
8 Philip Pearlstein
Temple of Hatshepsut, 1979
aquatint



9 Ed Ruscha
Paradise, 1986
dry pigment on paper



10 Wayne Thiebaud
Downgrade, 1979
etching and aquatint



11 James Turrell
Deep Sky VII, 1984
aquarelle



12 James Weeks
Concord Public Gardens, 1981
oil on canvas

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All dimensions are given in inches; height precedes width.
*Indicates works illustrated in this catalogue.

- 1 Jennifer Bartlett (b. 1941)
*In the Garden #118**
1982
silkscreen
29 x 38½
- 2 Jack Beal (b. 1931)
Black Eyed Susans
1980
pastel on paper
34 x 44
- 3 Vija Celmins (b. 1939)
*Ocean Surface 1**
1982
drypoint
26 x 20½
- 4 Vija Celmins (b. 1939)
Jupiter Moon-White Constellation
1982
mezzotint and etching
26 x 20½
- 5 Vija Celmins (b. 1939)
Alliance
1982
drypoint and aquatint
26 x 20½
- 6 Vija Celmins (b. 1939)
*Constellation-Uccello**
1982
aquatint with soft ground
26 x 20½
- 7 Janet Fish (b. 1938)
*Autumn Leaves and Canteloupe**
1982
pastel on paper
39 x 28
- 8 Sidney Goodman (b. 1936)
*East River Drive**
1979
oil on canvas
36 x 51
- 9 Richard Haas (b. 1936)
Old Waterworks, Philadelphia
1977
watercolor
17½ x 25½
- 10 Richard Haas (b. 1936)
*View Through Sun Room, Haas House**
1983
watercolor
21½ x 34
- 11 David Hockney (b. 1937)
Vase and Flowers
1969
etching and aquatint
27¾ x 21¾
- 12 Yvonne Jacquette (b. 1934)
Two Ferries
1982-1983
aquatint
30 x 22
- 13 Alex Katz (b. 1927)
Good Morning
1975
silkscreen
37½ x 28½
- 14 Alex Katz (b. 1927)
Late July
1970
lithograph
22 x 30

- 15 Sylvia Plimack Mangold (b. 1938)
Untitled (17 December 1983)
1983
pastel on paper
22 x 29¼
- 16 John Moore (b. 1941)
*Light Manufacturing**
1984
oil on board
30 x 24
- 17 Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929)
*Floating Three Way Plug**
1976
etching and aquatint
42⅛ x 32¼
- 18 Philip Pearlstein (b. 1924)
Sacsahuaman
1979
aquatint
29¾ x 39½
- 19 Philip Pearlstein (b. 1924)
Stonehenge
1979
aquatint
29¾ x 39½
- 20 Philip Pearlstein (b. 1924)
*Temple of Hatshepsut**
1979
aquatint
29¾ x 39½
- 21 Philip Pearlstein (b. 1924)
Temples at Abu Simbel
1979
aquatint
29¾ x 39½
- 22 Philip Pearlstein (b. 1924)
Tintern Abbey
1979
aquatint
29¾ x 39½
- 23 Fairfield Porter (1907-1975)
The Christmas Tree (Interior with Christmas Tree)
1971
lithograph
26 x 20¼
- 24 Fairfield Porter (1907-1975)
Isle au Haut
1975
color lithograph
25¾ x 22
- 25 Ed Ruscha (b. 1937)
*Paradise**
1986
dry pigment on paper
60⅛ x 40½
- 26 Wayne Thiebaud (b. 1920)
*Downgrade**
1979
etching and aquatint
29¾ x 22½
- 27 James Turrell (b. 1943)
*Deep Sky I-VII (*VII illustrated)*
1984
aquatint
21 x 27 each
- 28 James Weeks (b. 1922)
*Concord Public Gardens**
1981
oil on canvas
51 x 73

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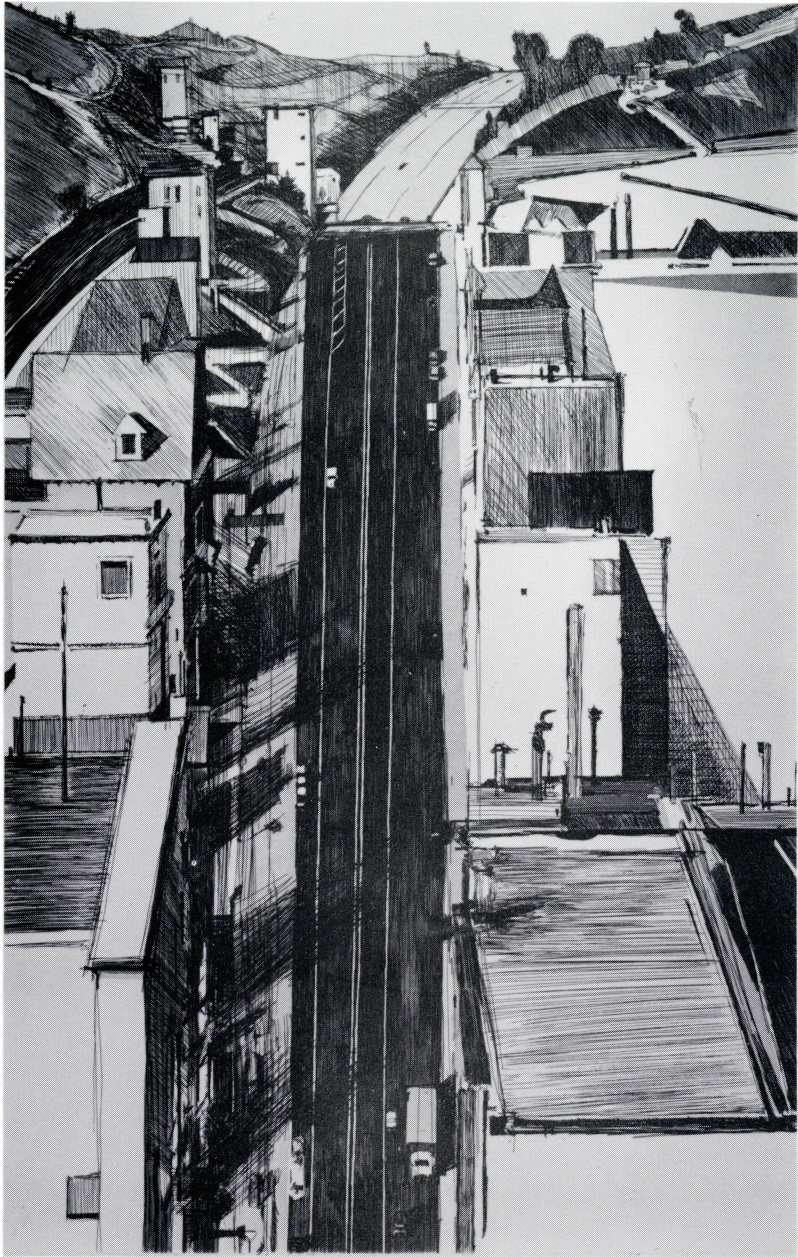
THE SORDONI ART GALLERY takes pride in presenting an exhibition drawn from the Collection of Mellon Bank, Pittsburgh. Everyone associated with the Gallery thanks the Bank for its generosity in making selected works from the Collection available to the students at Wilkes University and the citizens of Northeastern Pennsylvania.

This exhibition grew out of initial discussions between Terrence W. Casey, Vice President/Private Asset Management, and Melanie Maslow Lumia, a member of the Sordoni Art Gallery's Advisory Commission. Once the project was under way, Peter B. Eglin, Chairman, President and C.E.O. of Mellon Bank, N.A., gave his enthusiastic support. Brian J. Lang, Art Collection Administrator, also worked tirelessly on all aspects of the project. Jane Richards, curator of the Mellon Art Collection, provided me with insights regarding the evolution of the Collection and read an early draft of my essay. Other readers included Christopher N. Breiseth, Robert J. Heaman, Nancy L. Krueger, and Brian Lang. I appreciate their comments and suggestions.

I am especially grateful to Frank V. Cahouet, Chairman, President, and C.E.O. of Mellon Bank Corporation, for contributing the Foreword to this catalogue.

—S I G





Wayne Thiebaud, *Downgrade*, 1979

Contemporary Realist Art from the Collection of Mellon Bank

August 24 through September 28, 1997

Reception: August 23, 5-7 p.m.

This exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with an essay by Stanley I Grand.

SORDONI ART GALLERY

Wilkes University

150 South River Street

Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766

(717) 831-4325

Hours: Noon until 5 p.m., 7 days a week

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