

Sooner Scene

THE MOST RECENT SHOW OF ARTIST JOHN O'NEIL CREATED SOME EXCITEMENT AND MIXED EMOTIONS

IN THE sophisticated language of light and color, painter John O'Neil this month presented his most eloquent work at the University of Oklahoma Museum of Art. His show consisted of the 95 paintings he completed during the past year while on sabbatical leave in Italy.

As a layman it is difficult for me to explain adequately the excitement created by the works of this modern painter. O'Neil is an abstract impressionist, and most of the students and visitors at his show this month reacted quite positively to what his painting had to say. I made a number of visits to his exhibit, and I made it a point to overhear what my fellow visitors had to say about what they saw. I gathered a variety of comments.

One faculty member, a psychologist, remarked that he thought most people ask the wrong questions about abstract painting. He explained that the questions which occurred to him were *What is the artist saying?* or *What does he mean by this?*, rather than the usual question *What is it?*

Another perceptive amateur said, "O'Neil is primarily a colorist. His work captures the beauty and light of natural phenomena."

An art student, commenting to a companion, put his reaction in more professional terms: "Although many abstractionists seem to say the same thing over and over with only a limited variety of expression, Professor O'Neil presents a broad range in both technique and perception."

To me there was some clue, at least, to what the artist had in mind in the names he attached to his paintings. For example, in this collection we find "The Way Towards the Woods," "Spiked Ascent," "Windscape," "Day Pulse," "Noon Yellow," "Lightfall," "Branching Violet."

The best insight I have found to O'Neil the painter, is in his own words which appear in the preface for a catalogue prepared in Copenhagen in 1960 for a group of Danish painters:

"I see, we say, meaning 'I understand.'

"To illumine: a painting may create a light that has the resplendence and glow of fire itself, or conversely, a cold and scintillating lunar phosphorescence. It is within the range of pigment to make this light rather than simply mirror it—the Impres-

sionists demonstrated that, and the Pointillists gave the fact the gravity of a scientific principle.

"The prismatic fracturing of light which Bonnard formed into an act of love is now a heady nostalgia, such as the pleasant sights and simple delights of childhood evoke in retrospect, one which can never quite be found again.

"But the light which dazzles our eyes today is more apt to be the searing white flash; the lavender and orange pulsations follow, painful upon our closed lids, in diminishing and aching radiance.

"To be born is to experience light, and to die is to lack it, to lose it. What the artist makes, even ineptly, is a light-existence paralleling our own, but intensified and all-absorbing.

"If the Renaissance painter existed in a sometimes sharp, sometimes cloudy world of chiaroscuro, and crowned his saints with the nimbus and the aureole, the artist now finds the old lustre gone, but in its place lies harshly the white brilliance of a tropic noon.

"Light determines quality: a bauble glitters, but in some subtle way that which we value gives forth signal flashes from an inner core of brilliance."

William James in writing about the principles of psychology is intrigued by the artist and particularly by the abstract painter whom he considers a highly intellectual and sophisticated representative of human race. This is what James has to say about the difficulties of communication, even among experts: "Over immense departments of our thought we are still, all of

us, in the savage state. Similarity operates in us, for the abstract has not taken possession, and so it is that all these judgements by experts, even though unmotivated, are so valuable. Saturated with experience of a particular class of materials, an expert intuitively feels whether a newly-reported fact is probable or not, whether a proposal by hypothesis is worthless or the reverse. He instinctively knows that, in a novel case, this and not that will be the promising course of action." The well-known story of the old judge advising the new one never to give reasons for his decisions—"the decisions will probably be right, the reasons will certainly be wrong."

The amateur as well as the expert has a right to like or dislike the product of the creative artist, the articulation of the reasons is only of secondary importance. As a matter of fact, it is perfectly logical that the reasons for liking a painting might be different on different occasions and under different circumstances. One word which gives a clue to the intuitive conclusions of the amateur critics is "preperception." Again it is William James who comments on this notion and says, "It is for this reason that men have no eyes but for those aspects of things which they have already been taught to discern. In short, the only things which we commonly see are those things which we preperceive, and the only things which we preperceive are those which have been labelled for us and the labels stamped into our mind."

On each visit to the O'Neil show I experienced a different feeling and reacted in a slightly different way to his work. Whether this was caused by the differences in the people in the gallery each time, the experiences of day, or the absence of expert advice about how I was supposed to think and react, it all amounted to an interesting experience and left me with a greater appreciation of the work of a very fine artist.

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