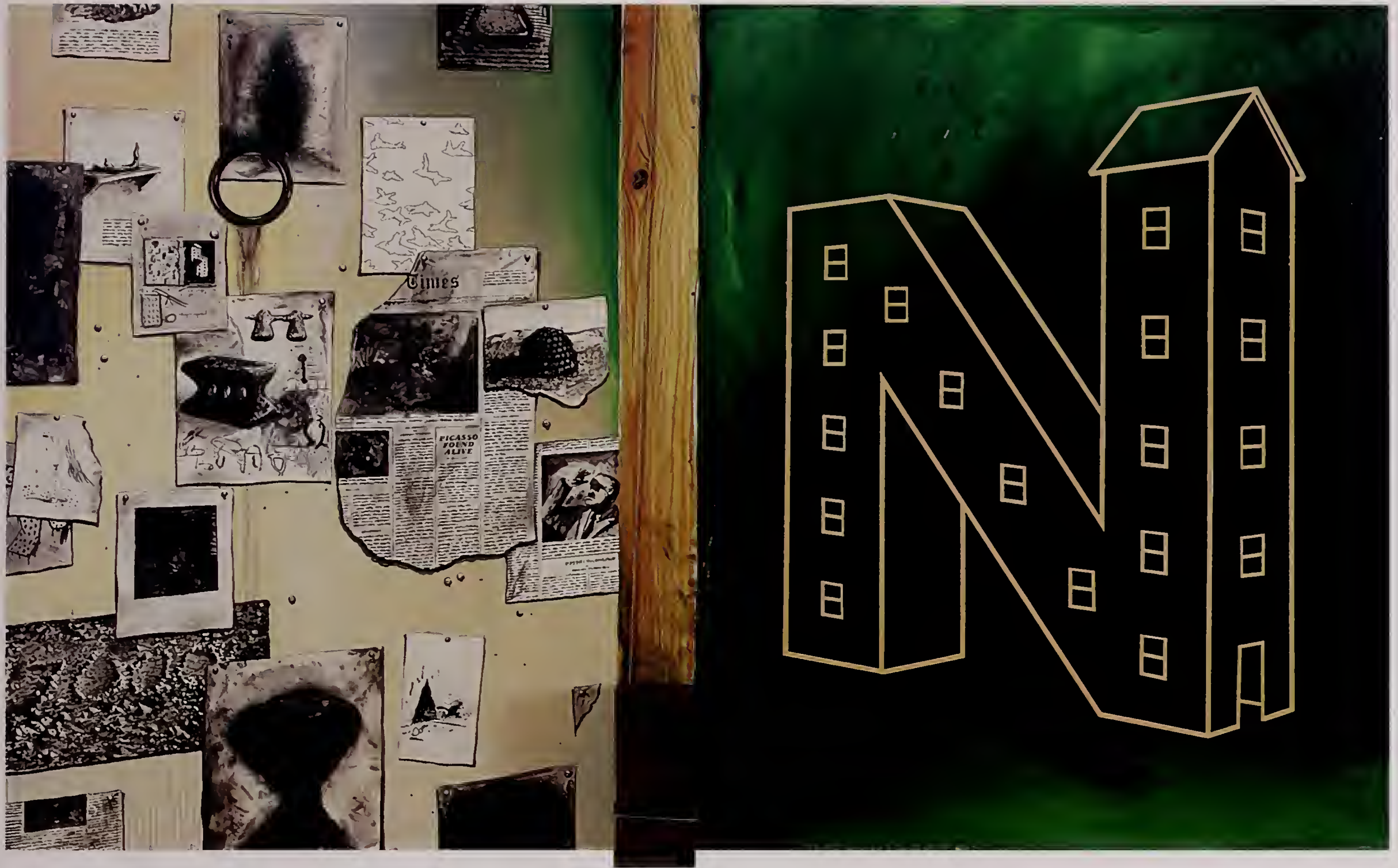

CONTEMPORARY DIPTYCHS: DIVIDED VISIONS

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Cover: Edward Henderson, *Slope of Repose*, 1986

CONTEMPORARY DIPTYCHS: DIVIDED VISIONS

Roni Feinstein

Sarah Charlesworth, *Bowl and Column*, 1986

This exhibition explores the widespread use of the diptych format in contemporary American art. A diptych is a work of art composed of two distinct units that are meant to be seen together. Those selected for this exhibition deal with issues of content and representation: they use the two-panel format to create associations and dialogues. For this reason, diptychs that spread a single motif over both panels or are concerned with abstract formal relationships have been excluded. In some of the diptychs presented here the works are physically divided; in others, it is imagery rather than physical division that breaks up the field.

The definition of the term "diptych" in this exhibition is unusually broad, and includes painting, sculpture, photography, and video art. The panels in some of the works are unequal in size and, unlike the traditional diptych, vertical in orientation; a few only simulate the two-panel format. All of the works, however, participate in pictorial and conceptual strategies designed to exploit the binary structure of the diptych for the sake of comparison, association, or narrative.

The first diptychs were ancient writing tablets consisting of two pieces of wood hinged together, the inner sides waxed for writing on with a stylus. A more elaborate and figurative type made of ivory and gilt was popular in the Byzantine world of the fifth and sixth centuries. These were consular diptychs, which commemorated rulers and administrators of the Eastern Christian Empire. Although some diptychs with religious themes appeared in the Middle Ages, on the whole the form fell into disuse. It was revived in the fifteenth century by Netherlandish painters, along with the triptych format, for altarpieces. But by the late sixteenth century, diptychs had become secularized, used primarily for companion paintings, such as portrait pendants of a husband and wife, intended as a pair, but also visually independent.

The contemporary revival of the diptych format in American art has its roots in the modern conception of the work of art as a field of ideas and information about the world rather than as a reflection of nature or as a witness to the emotions. This concept was born in the art and thought of the French Dadaist Marcel Duchamp, who wanted to put art "at the service of the mind." In 1912, he developed the idea of the Readymade. He took a commonplace, mass-

produced object and, without altering it in any way, placed it in the context of art (i.e., a gallery or museum). Here the object served as a trigger for the viewer's mind and imagination. From 1915 to 1923, Duchamp worked on *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*, the first significant diptych of the twentieth century. A painting on two panes of vertically joined glass, this highly cryptic work was filled with visual and verbal puns and accompanied by a book of written notes. The result was an accumulation of hybrid mechanical imagery and biomorphic forms enacting a story of frustrated love. Each of the panels represented the domain of one of the sexes; the break between the panels symbolized the futility of their union.

Despite the fame of Duchamp's work, the diptych format remained an anomaly through the first half of the twentieth century. It was revived in the early 1950s by the American artist Robert Rauschenberg in a series of abstract works which placed renewed emphasis on the physical structure of the two-panel format. By the middle of the decade, he had turned to objects and images from the everyday world, which he distributed over the fields both of single and of multi-panel paintings. Like elements of a picture language, the objects and images engaged in an associative dialogue across the surface, their non-hierarchical clusters conveying a multiplicity of references and evoking nonsequential narratives.

In the work of Jasper Johns and in Pop art, the idea of depicting things for their associative value was reinforced by the notion of iconic reductions, as are found in Johns' flags and Andy Warhol's soup cans. In such work, the diptych format was often used to multiply the work's content. The simple conjunctions of mass-media images in Pop art generally led to associations revolving around themes of consumerism and desire. In Johns' *Two Flags* of 1962, where two American flags were painted on two panels placed one above the other, the effect was to force a reconsideration of the flag as an emblem.

In the late 1960s, the diptych format became highly important to Conceptual artists as a documentary tool. Conceptual art called for the elimination of painting and sculpture in favor of an art consisting of textual and photographic information, language, and ideas. The binary structure of the diptych served as a means by which to compare different pieces of information and to examine different aspects of the same idea.

Since the late 1970s diptychs have played an important role in the return to content that has characterized Postmodernist painting and sculpture. Issues of narrative and allegory, language and concept, autobiography and self-expression, social, political, and cultural commentary, psychology and metaphysics, discredited by the abstract formalism of Minimalist art, have been resurrected by Postmodernism as legitimate concerns of the visual arts. The diptych emerged as a major pictorial strategy for conveying such issues, and the format was quickly appropriated by artists with widely divergent intentions and aesthetic orientations.

Each of these artists exploits the fact that objects and images have ideas and associations built into them which are a matter of historical and cultural convention as well as of personal significance. As soon as two such images are brought together within the inherently relational structure of the diptych format, a dialectical situation is established which may involve suggestions of either/or, this/that, before/after, and near/far. The content of the work, however, is not literal and fixed, as it generally was in Pop and Conceptual art, but metaphorical and open-ended, poetic and evocative.

The diptych in Postmodernist art also serves as a stylistic device to avoid the naturalistic appearances which are normally part of figurative art. Although Postmodernist artists have returned to representation and the illusionistic devices of modeling and perspective, they disdain the mere replication of nature. The diptych format, with its unfixed visual dialogue between objects and motifs, signals that these artists want their works to be seen not as mirrors held up to nature or windows onto the real world but rather as intellectual constructs, designed to connote something about the world through an associative process.

The diptych format also serves to set the work apart from the prevailing visual stimuli of our culture—newspapers, televisions, movies, magazines, and advertisements. In the face of this barrage of images, how can artists produce images that viewers apprehend as significant? The diptych confronts viewers with two disparate images that they feel compelled to "read" together. This process inhibits the normally rapid way in which we have been conditioned to experience visual imagery. It is thus no accident that artists who work with the two-panel system use motifs adopted or derived from the vast image bank of our culture itself. They exploit the dualistic

Rhonda Zwillinger, *The Promise*, 1985

structure of the diptych in order to critique the ideology that shapes our experience and to violate and expose cultural stereotypes and clichés.

The widespread use of the diptych format today may be stimulated by the contemporary critical theories of semiotics and post-structuralism. These urge literary models upon the visual arts as a means of comprehending signs and their referents, images and their meanings and interrelationships. The parallel between art and literature is reinforced in the diptych format because the binary structure forces a particular kind of vision or perception; rather than providing a single point of focus, it promotes a scanning of the images from left to right or up and down in the manner of reading. The literary model is furthered when the two panels of the diptych are likened to facing pages in a book or magazine, or to the ancient writing tablets from which the diptych form derived. In this sense, the diptych has remained true to its source of origin, as it continues to deal with the communication of information and ideas.

Thoroughly modern, however, is the viewer's role in contemporary diptychs. Because the meanings suggested by the images are not definitive, room is left for the viewer to engage in the creative process: the viewer must determine the nature of the relationship between the images. Indeed, it is in the mind of the individual viewer that the interpretation of the work resides. No true resolution of the work's meaning is therefore possible, nor is any single interpretation right or wrong. Each person's response is highly subjective, dependent on experience, memory, and imagination.

While the imagery in some of the works in the exhibition is self-evident, in others it seems enigmatic and closed, the artists here making a virtue of difficulty. For the diptychs in this latter group, the viewer may benefit from the supplementary texts provided in the following section. The analyses demonstrate the manner in which each work can be approached and experienced, and suggest some of the possible trains of thought that might be followed in attempting to grasp its meaning.

SELECTED WORKS

Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 1983

In the late 1950s, Johns developed an extremely hermetic form of artmaking in which clusters of different images work together to carry meaning. In the left-hand panel of this untitled work of 1983, what appears to be an abstract, decorative motif is actually a quotation from the soldier at the foot of Christ's tomb in the *Resurrection* panel of Matthias Grünwald's Isenheim Altarpiece (c. 1510–15). The right-hand panel of the Johns presents a wall in the artist's country bathroom, shown from the vantage point of the tub. On the wall at the right is a sign with a skull and crossbones which bears a partially cropped warning in German and French to beware of falling ice; to the left is a line rendering of one of Johns' many prints or posters depicting a Savarin coffee can with painters' brushes. At the bottom edge is the bathtub faucet. The religious image, skull and crossbones, and warning of danger suggest that while the artist sat in his tub, he confronted his aging body, and his thoughts turned to his mortality; the presence of the tools of his trade may symbolize the key to his immortality.

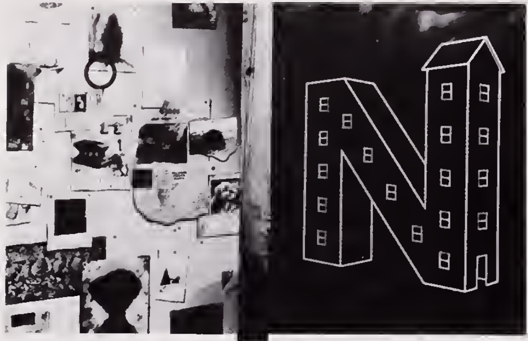
Jennifer Bartlett, *Dog and Cat*, 1983

This is a late painting in Bartlett's In the Garden series, which began in 1980. In the winter of that year, as a result of an ill-advised house-swap, she found herself in an inhospitable villa in the south of France. Prompted by boredom, she began to make drawings of the villa's garden, with its rectangular pool, stone cherub, and grove of cypress trees.

The top panel of this painting shows a wide-angle, distant view of the pool and cherub that is bracketed between a delicate tracery of plants at the front and a dark impenetrable wall of trees behind. To the right of the pool is a little white dog seen from behind. In the bottom panel, the dog is turned frontward and paired with a cat; they are both, apparently, plaster garden ornaments. They are shown in a close-up view from above in what seems to be the villa's driveway and they are illuminated by a strange glare, as if by the headlights of a car. There is an abrupt, startled quality to this bottom image, almost as if the lumpy, modeled creatures had become animate. The two panels of this work, then, imply a dreamlike narrative; they present not just different motifs and points of view but different moments in time.

David Salle, *Thin Air*, 1986

Salle's coloristically rich painting *Thin Air* brings together a cluster of seemingly unrelated images rendered in a variety of techniques and styles. In the left-hand panel, a piece of fabric printed with a biomorphic swirl pattern in red and beige is used in lieu of canvas. At its center is a reproduction of a seventeenth-century anamorphosis of a man standing behind a balustrade. (An anamorphosis is an image that can be read only when seen as a reflection on a polished metal cylinder held at a particular angle.) The atmospheric blue field of the right-hand panel contains a line drawing of a barefoot woman in shorts holding a cooking pot repeated twice, once smaller so that it appears farther away; two small silkscreened images of a baseball player at bat, also repeated twice, one less densely inked than the other; and an academically modeled woman, naked except for her shoes and socks, in a curiously unsensuous though sexually explicit pose. The two women in the right-hand panel can be seen in terms of oppositions: line drawing *vs.* painted volume, woman as cook *vs.* woman as sex object, clothed woman with bare feet *vs.* nude woman with socks and shoes, etc. No such analysis, however, accounts for the poetry and provocative nature of the whole.



Edward Henderson, *Slope of Repose*, 1986

In *Slope of Repose* things are not as they seem. While the left-hand panel might appear to be a surface covered with newspaper and other elements of collage, it is in fact a painting of a collaged surface rendered in a *trompe l'oeil* manner. The wooden bar running down the center of the work is not actual but painted, so that the painting becomes a false diptych, and the three-dimensional object which rests upon a metal shelf at the bottom of the "wooden" bar is not the brick it appears to be, but styrofoam. Finally, in the right-hand panel, the outlined form of the large apartment house in the shape of the letter N, which seems to be painted, is actually assembled from thin strips of balsa wood. A system of reversals, then, has occurred from one panel to the next: what appears to be collaged on the left-hand panel is painted and what seems to be painted on the right-hand panel is collaged.

While the simulated wood grain of the dividing bar recalls early Cubist paintings (a reference reinforced by the newspaper clipping "Picasso Found Alive" in the left-hand panel), the many irrational elements contained within the work and the illusionistic imagery of the right-hand panel suggest a relationship to Surrealism. Henderson's eclecticism contributes to the multiplicity of reference contained within his art.

Eric Fischl, *A Visit to/A Visit from the Island*, 1983

In this painting, Fischl uses the binary structure of the diptych to contrast two different worlds. In the left-hand panel, upper middle-class whites are shown on a visit to an island; they engage in leisure-time activities in a vivid blue sea. The right-hand panel presents a tragic scene derived from a newspaper photograph which showed the disastrous attempt of a group of Haitian natives to reach the United States by boat. The blacks, trying to escape from the poverty and repression of their island (presumably the same island where the whites vacation), are washed up on shore by a storm-blackened sea. A woman in white stands at the center of the panel, a personification of heroism and of torment suffered. There is also a standing central figure in the left-hand panel, an adolescent in a T-shirt awkwardly biting his or her fingernails; anxiety here stems from the internal, neurotic struggles that are perhaps the privileges of a leisured class. Fischl, however, does not condemn; he holds moral judgment in abeyance. Two extremities of possibility are presented for the viewer to ponder.

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *The Blue Cup*, 1985-86

Komar and Melamid, two Russian emigrés who have long collaborated, have dedicated their careers to a satirical analysis of the art and politics of our time. The right-hand panel of *The Blue Cup* is executed in the Soviet Realist style in which the artists were trained, an academic style whose Old Master technique and layers of glazes are anachronistic in today's world. The panel shows Lenin in the act of dropping a blue teacup that hangs suspended in the air. The left-hand panel, covered with paint-splashed crumpled material, is executed in imitation of the Western style of junk assemblage, a style which perhaps serves as an emblem of artistic freedom. At a point which corresponds to the siting of the blue cup in the right-hand panel, a splatter of blue paint occurs. In this diptych, then, two artistic styles which reflect the culture, political structure, and art politics of the societies in which they were produced are juxtaposed to explore the contradictions between them. The blue serves as an effective device that joins the two panels: the style of Russia meets the West and they exist in poignant harmony.

Hope Sandrow, *A Force Unknown to the Public*, 1986

This work was the result of a commission in which the artist was asked to photograph two daughters who were leaving home, one for marriage, the other for university studies. Sandrow created less a portrait of the sisters than scenes which express something universal about sisterhood and about the essence of parenting, the holding and the letting go.

In the top panel, the sisters' heads are absent as the camera sharply focuses on their arms and chests, emphasizing their womanliness and physicality. Their fists, which almost touch, express a solidity and comraderie. Behind them is a fragment of a David Wojnarowicz installation piece with a smashed television set and globe, the latter further reinforcing the "of this world" quality. In the bottom panel, all is insubstantial and blurred. The daughters' heads are cropped by the frame and seen at odd angles, their eyes staring outward, their appearances seeming momentary and evanescent like those of spirits or apparitions. The background, which might at first suggest a deep space, is actually a Willem de Kooning abstraction, a painting which, as Sandrow said, seemed to her "of the mind," encompassing moving and changing ideas. The two panels then represent, among other things, the realms of the body and the spirit and of the tangible and the fleeting.

Gary Hill, *Primarily Speaking*, 1983

In the hands of the video artist, video technology becomes a flexible tool with which to record, transform, and generate imagery, and to question the way images are perceived. Gary Hill's videotape *Primarily Speaking* offers a seen, heard, and spoken meditation on forms of meaning. It is a two-channel tape intended to be shown either with a split screen on a single monitor or on two separate monitors. The use of two simultaneously playing channels, each with its own continually shifting and changing imagery, confounds normal habits of seeing and results in a vast multiplication of images. The frames of reference encompassed by the work are further expanded through the use of the spoken word. The words and phrases—idiomatic, clichéd, and directly addressing the viewer through the pronouns "you" and "we"—change along with the images, and while they sometimes relate to the objects and scenes on the television monitor, more often they do not. The videotape examines the interrelationship between speech and visual stimuli and the way this information is received and processed by the viewer's mind. The work is intellectually and visually stimulating; as the speaker says near the end of the tape, "Things travel fast by word of mouth."

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Nicholas Africano (b. 1948)
Boy and Angel, 1985-86
Oil on canvas with wax and celastic; two panels, 94 x 129 overall
Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

Ida Applebroog (b. 1929)
Peel Me Like a Grape, 1985
Oil on canvas; two panels, 86 x 60 overall
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Jennifer Bartlett (b. 1941)
Dog and Cat, 1983
Oil on canvas; two panels, 120 x 84 overall
Collection of the artist, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Sarah Charlesworth (b. 1947)
Bowl and Column, 1986
Color photograph, Cibachrome print; two panels, each 40 x 30
Collection of the artist, courtesy International With Monument Gallery, New York

Mark Dean (b. 1955)
Hunt, 1983
Casein on panel; two panels, 12 x 20½ overall
Collection of Leslie and Ron Rosenzweig

Me and Huck, 1985
Casein on panel; two panels, 12 x 21 overall
Collection of Rita and Benjamin D. Holloway

Jim Dine (b. 1935)
The Death at South Kensington (October), 1983
Oil on canvas with objects, 60½ x 87½ x 17¾
Collection of Eileen Rosenau

Barbara Ess (b. 1946)
Untitled, 1986
Color photographs, Monochrome prints; two panels, 21 x 49½ overall
Curt Marcus Gallery Inc., New York

Eric Fischl (b. 1948)
A Visit to/A Visit from the Island, 1983
Oil on canvas; two panels, 84 x 168 overall
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc.; Seymour M. Klein, President 83.17a-b

Stephen Frailey (b. 1957)
Untitled, 1986
Color photographs, Ektachrome prints; two panels, each 30 x 30
303 Gallery, New York

Steve Gianakos (b. 1938)
You...Bastard!, 1985
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 102¼
Collection of Raymond J. Learsy

Edward Henderson (b. 1951)
Slope of Repose, 1986
Oil, acrylic, ink, epoxy, balsa wood, steel, styrofoam, and string on canvas, 44 x 72 x 4
Collection of Sharon and John Hoffman

Gary Hill (b. 1951)
Primarily Speaking, 1983
Videotape, color, 18 minutes; two-channel, split-screen version
Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

Jasper Johns (b. 1930)
Untitled, 1983
Encaustic on canvas; two panels, 30½ x 45⅛ overall
Collection of the artist

Larry Johnson (b. 1959)
Untitled, 1985
Color photographs, Ektachrome prints; two panels, 20 x 24 and 24 x 20
303 Gallery, New York

Mike Kelley (b. 1954)
Panavision/Exploring II, 1986
Acrylic on paper tacked onto canvas; two panels, 42 x 95½ and 60 x 50¾
Metro Pictures Gallery, New York

Vitaly Komar (b. 1943) and **Alexander Melamid** (b. 1945)
The Blue Cup, 1985-86
Mixed media; two panels, 60 x 72 overall
Collection of Marcia and William Goodman

Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt (b. 1948)
Venetian Glass: The Charmin Baby Remembers the Birds of Venice and She Got Her Wings of Kitch, 1984
Mixed media; two panels, 52 x 52 x 3½ overall
Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

Robert Longo (b. 1951)
Round Heads and Square Heads, 1986
Mixed media; two panels, 76½ x 84 x 17 overall
Collection of the artist, courtesy Metro Pictures Gallery, New York

Michael Lucero (b. 1953)
Sun Fish, 1986
Clay with glazes, 24 x 51½ x 10
Sharpe Gallery, New York

Mary Lucier (b. 1944)
Amphibian, 1985
Videotape, color, 10 minutes; two-channel, split-screen version
Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

David Salle (b. 1952)
Thin Air, 1986
Acrylic, fabric, oil, and silkscreen on canvas; two panels, 93 x 120 overall
Collection of Norman Braman

Hope Sandrow (b. 1951)
A Force Unknown to the Public, 1986
Black-and-white photographs, silver prints; two panels, 42 x 30½ overall
Collection of Adrian and Robert Mnuchin

Mark Tansey (b. 1949)
Modern—Post Modern, 1981
Oil on canvas; two panels, each 40 x 40
Collection of Arlene and Avrom Doft

Rhonda Zwillinger (b. 1950)
The Promise, 1985
Oil on canvas, 45 x 70 x 2½
Collection of Eddo A. Bult

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