

Salone Annunciata Art Gallery
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Carlo Battaglia

by Milton Gendel

Carlo Battaglia's paintings are complete and unephemeral. They do not have the fragmentary and momentary aspects of most of the currently modish works, which are like debris outflung from a sphere orbiting somewhere out of reach - or the Platonic Idea reduced to a repetitious ratchety whisper, as if the needle were stuck in the groove of a played out cosmic record.

The interest and attraction of Battaglia's paintings are so immediately patent that they pose the question of why so much inferior, quick-consumption art gets more than its fair share of attention. The question may be connected with one asked at the last convention of the American Psychological Association: Is it possible to have a successful advertising campaign in which the advertisements themselves are strongly disliked? The answer was yes, and whatever the reasons - the all-engulfing appetite of an expanding consumer market, or the sheer weight of any response, positive or negative, of a mass audience - similar aberrant but attention-getting phenomena are now common in the field of art proper. The traditional roles of painting and advertising in which, for the purpose of image making, advertising was a respectful petitioner of the fine art of painting, have been readjusted and where they have managed to make an equal status connubium they have incorporated each other. The artist himself in these cases may become his own product, and star over his work, as in the recent case of a gallery catalogue which featured a photograph of the painter on the front of the cover and relegated a picture of his work to the back. More often the incorporation of "commercial art" tactics lands the painter in the position of a python that has swallowed a goat without reckoning on the creature's horns. Pop rounded on the advertising artists who were accustomed to plod along after the artists who, so to speak, were in business on their own. In a coy or bucko reversal, the follower discovered he was being followed by someone he thought he was following. The wispy small-time atmosphere is ironically underscored by the size of some of the enterprises. Rosenquist's thirty-meter reverie on the F.111 pursuit bomber (for Italy an infelicitous evocation of *l'aeropittura*) in fact impresses one with the inadequacy of its scale. As it borrows from the billboard, it reminds one that billboards can do the same thing well, or better, but certainly even bigger.

Even a huge surface area can be taken in and "consumed" at a glance. With Battaglia, the paintings are big in concept; more than a glance is needed to grasp them. They can be read in detail and then reread again and again, with pleasure and profit. Battaglia's one-man show two years ago at the Salita Gallery in Rome, marked the end of his apprenticeship to the schools of Paris and New York, and fittingly paid homage to Paolo Uccello. The *Battles* at the Salita cast Uccello's preoccupations with the organization of space and the play of vibrant color in contemporary terms, or illuminated a contemporary, and perennial, problem with light from the past.

The present paintings, in which space and light are handled easily and symphonically, make no overt appeal to tradition. They are, however, more European than American in their mastery of finished, tangible painting effects, and more American than European in the casual immediacy of drawing (that may, on the other hand, suggest a Matisse with American citizenship papers). Double, triple, multiple picture planes lead the viewer into depths which astonishingly then return him to the surface before inviting another plunge. Forms may be organic or geometric in structure and make up "jungles" or "landscapes" or distant "urban" perspectives. The whole complicated itinerary is made fascinatingly intense by color harmonies and discords that play between tonality and surface. What is more, the paintings do not owe their meaning to outside references. They are real works of art whose company offers depth and variety, and thus, unlike the season's fashions, does not pall.

The cheerful contemporary richness of his art, poured out seemingly with an effortless hand, places Battaglia in the front rank of today's painters.