

# Art in America

January 1991 \$4.75

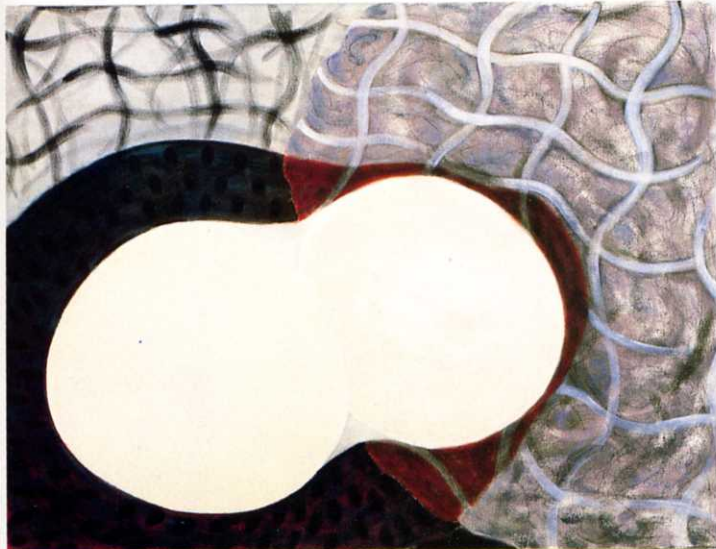
*Titian in  
Washington*

*Kosuth on the  
Taboo Image*

*Freud's  
Antiquities*

*On Site in  
Indonesia*





Susan Crile: *Soft, Wild, and Naked*, 1989, oil on canvas, 38 by 50 inches; at Graham Modern.

of Lorna Simpson's sociocritical photomontages and the African-American answer to Mary Kelly's arch meditations about life as a middle-aged, middle-class art-worker.

Weems's story concerns the emergence and demise of a romantic relationship, and the consolidation of a sense of self. It is a stylized story without the feel of autobiography. The narrator's voice is Southern and tough and full of wry humor. At first, there is talk of fried fish, Carmen Jones and that ole black magic. All of the action in the black-and-white photographs takes place around a single table, beneath the glare of a hanging lamp. The lovers' ardent embraces and boozy, cigarette-smoke-shrouded card games give way to mutual withdrawal, she staring into space, he reading a newspaper. Other characters appear—a preadolescent daughter, a mother, a few friends. All revolve around the table as if it were a solid realization of the photograph's surface, and the light above the camera's unblinking eye.

The relationship between man and woman ultimately founders over issues of power. She asserts her interest in politics, her need for personal independence, her prerogatives as the couple's major wage earner. He balks. She leaves. In some of the photographs, their relationship excludes the viewer; they have eyes only for each other. In others, her engagement with the audience is frank and open. There is, then, a latent parable about the urge to make art—

about the drive to overcome the tug of destructive, insular emotions in order to address the public on issues of general importance. The woman's decision is difficult; her attraction to her intolerant, benighted lover was real. And even in the woman's triumphal concluding solitude, she is haunted not only by the specter of loneliness but also by convention. This is the way the story *had* to end.

Weems, slightly younger than the story's 38-year-old heroine, is a Cal Arts graduate with advanced degrees in folklore as well as art. She now teaches at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, lectures widely and shows her work mostly at nonprofit spaces. By training and practice, Weems is an observer; she remains a little distant from her subjects, but she knows them intimately. As demonstrated in a recent exhibition and book called *Then What? Photographs and Folklore*, she can assume, without a trace of caricature or condescension, a great variety of black American voices, most of them steeped in religion and myth. (Two of the portraits in the narrative at P.P.O.W. appeared in this book, as did two other photos also shown at the gallery.) In all of her work, Weems examines archetypal narrative systems and throws special illumination into their emotional depths.

—Nancy Princenthal

### Doug Ohlson at Andre Zarre

Nothing is more fundamental to

painting in the modern (*not* post-modern) sense than the structuring of space. Among the several things that Ohlson's paintings do to us, none is stronger or more magical than the way he makes color enact spellbinding spatial effects. Through color juxtapositions alone, he can make forms jump or retreat or hang in delicate suspension against fields of other hues.

The protagonists in an Ohlson painting usually are three or four elongated bands or bars, set either vertically or horizontally in the rectangular field. The edges of these bars are mostly razor sharp, and they are each painted in a single, uninflected hue. The drama unfolds in the way that each bar relates to the field that passes behind it, or in the way that each field butts up to the next, or in the way the aggregate of bars and fields harmonizes into the overall image.

Except perhaps in its unusual horizontality, *Spirit Lake* is characteristic of Ohlson's enterprise. The several bars hang in space like the apparition of a partially outlined colonnade, their vertical and horizontal axes forming a kind of skeleton that measures, defines and gives pace to the wide picture plane. Floating behind in a series of varied but stately intervals are the contrasting fields, each in its own hue

and brushed in its own characteristic way. By color juxtapositions alone, the bars, which are all perforce on the surface of the canvas, take up positions across the painting in a complex play of illusionary depth. In a very pure way, this is a spatial architecture wrought by a keenly sensitive adjustment of color relationships.

A fortuitous and revealing comparison of work by another gifted hand from an earlier era was on view concurrently at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Certain paintings by Burgoyne Diller from his so-called "First Theme" series use a few rectangular bars (and sometimes also squares) set out in a single, neutral field. In the paintings I am thinking of, which are the most sober and the most powerful, the field is a uniform black, without brush stroke or other visible surface inflection, as in, for example, *First Theme, 1938*. The energy and dynamism of these compositions are generated solely by the force of the sharp, rectilinear edges of the bars acting on or against one another as they seem to cut into and break up the inert background.

The effect and the process in Ohlson's work are almost the reverse. What Diller superbly achieves by means of drawing, Ohlson creates by color. The lat-



Nino Longobardi: *Untitled*, 1990, oil on canvas, 60 3/4 by 46 inches; at Germans van Eck.

