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Art

Robert Moskowitz, In His Depth

At Hirshhorn, a Fine Retrospective

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It may take a second to make out the slender form in the middle of the tall dark painting. But when you do, you realize it's not merely the formal element of an essentially abstract composition, but a reference-loaded with implications. Surely Giacometti would have approved of the service to which one of his singular figures has been put.

Look long enough at almost any of Robert Moskowitz's densely worked, monolithic paintings on the walls of the Hirshhorn Museum, and a world of nuance, art-historical commentary and wry humor opens up.

And it's about time. The Hirshhorn's chief curator for exhibitions, Ned Rifkin, deserves credit for making Moskowitz's first major retrospective a reality. It's a big, beautiful show that uses the generous space to the pictures' best advantage. At the age of 54, Moskowitz has been out there a long time, too often on the edges of the mainstream art world, refusing to conform to the conventions of any popular style or genre but his own, punching away at our perceptions of what the art of our time is about. His gutsy, painterly pictures both take issue with and incorporate elements of almost every major development in the contemporary art world.

But Moskowitz's images are not merely clever, as reproductions of them too often seem to suggest. You have to stand in front of his paintings to appreciate them fully. As in the works of Ad Reinhardt, there is so much subtlety, so much vi-

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Robert Moskowitz

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sual play between surface, color, texture and subject, that photographs simply don't do his compositions justice.

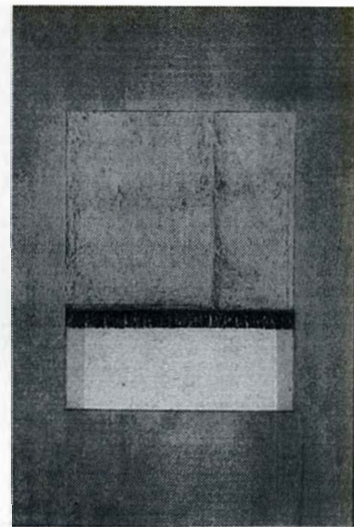
The mostly untitled "corner-paintings" of the late '60s and early '70s especially, which culminate in works that at first seem entirely black or gray, must be contemplated on so many levels that even the finest transparency robs them of life. One of them dated 1971, for example—one of the subtlest images in this exhibit—appears to be a flat ground of bluish gray, on which tiny sparks of brilliant yellows, greens and reds float like the spots you sometimes see when you close your eyes in the bright sun. But look closer. There is depth behind these: the corner of a room so quietly rendered as to be invisible at a distance. Up close one realizes that there is a lot of space implied in the painting; almost a landscape behind the surface. Likewise, Moskowitz's early collage paintings, because they incorporate found objects such as yellowing window shades and brown paper bags—hinting at the influence of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg—are objects that need to be walked around and experienced in person.

Moskowitz's paintings are nearly always good, and that's hard to say of many painters today. He's not only technically proficient, but profoundly thoughtful. His is art that is essentially about art—something that's been out of vogue for some time. Like Florida-based artist John Torreano, who builds constructions out of stained and painted wood, jewels and other objects, Moskowitz defies comfortable categorization.

While his paintings are many-layered, combining meticulous technique with fundamentally abstract intent, he often employs as a central theme some recognizable subject that seems blatantly to mock our consumeristic values. But visual allusions to contemporary trends, and the use of these symbols or cultural icons, such as the Empire State Building, Rodin's "Thinker," the tail fins of an old Cadillac, a windmill, the Eddystone Light or a smile button, to name some prominent examples, do not signify the political intent they might in the works of Cindy Sherman or Barbara Kruger. On the one hand they do elicit a contemplative, emotional reaction as well as orienting the viewer with familiar objects.

But also they are means of forcing the viewer to see shapes for what they are. A familiar shape loses its identity when only its edge is revealed as a silhouette, rendered flatly against a mottled background. When they are taken out of the context in which we customarily think of them, we are challenged to see shapes solely as pictorial elements. What they represent is no longer the point. To this degree, Moskowitz owes a great deal to Duchámp.

Moskowitz's pictures don't contain, or for that matter need, blatant political content. They stand perfectly well on their own as art objects, pure and not so simple. In the late '50s, during the waning years of abstract ex-



COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

An untitled 1962 painting by Moskowitz.

pressionism and the New York School, Moskowitz studied with Adolph Gottlieb at the Pratt Institute of Art in Brooklyn. Here the young technical illustrator learned to think of painting as "... concerned with the problem of projecting intangible and elusive images that ... have meaning in terms of feeling." And so Moskowitz embarked on a career that encompassed experiments with abstract expressionism, pop art, dadaism, minimalism and any number of more contemporary stylistic influences. By the mid-'60s this eclectic artist had arrived at what would prove to be the kernel of a style of his own, one that would develop over the next two decades into something unique.

His most recent pieces, among these one featuring giant tumbling tenpins completed just this year, have become darker, their surfaces more distressed and burnished. Like Washington painter Robin Rose, Moskowitz has begun to work down the layers of paint to let the ground color—usually red—show through, much the way a child might scrape layers of crayon from a ground of watercolor to create a jewellike network of color. And more and more it is not so much the subject Moskowitz is concerned with as the painting itself as an *object*. When one considers that Torreano, Rose and others are moving in much the same direction, this can only signal a profound change in the way certain contemporary artists are viewing the role of their work—a change that spells bad news for the reigning postmodern sophisms of the past decade. And *that's* good news.

Behind every great image, borrowed or invented, is a great idea. And if the artist is good, *really* good, he can occasionally wed an image to the idea that drives it to such a degree that the two become inseparable. This done, a painting speaks volumes at a glance while at the same time retaining the inherent mystery of the artistic process: It reveals its full potential slowly over a period of time. That is the magic of really good art. And the art of Robert Moskowitz is really good.

Robert Moskowitz: A Retrospective, at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden on the Mall, through Sept. 17.