

CHRISTMAS EXHIBITIONS PLAYING A WIDE FIELD

By STUART PRESTON

HAS science fiction its painters laureate? Yes, certainly. On one level, comic strip artists, on another, Matta is one name that comes to mind, a visionary illustrator of Armageddon whose eminence in that line is now challenged by Philipp Weichberger, a young German painter holding an impressive one-man show at Galerie Internationale, 1095 Madison Avenue at 83d Street.

Subject matter here must be interpreted in the eye of the individual beholder. But what seems to throb on the surface of these paintings are atomic reactors gone berserk; battles between cloud-armies; wars of worlds on a titanic, fatal scale, and what you will. Such themes may sound like childish fantasies, but they are exactly those which enable Weichberger to display all his considerable ingenuities of technique. All is swiftly suggested in fluent and accomplished draftsmanship, revelling in dizzy false perspectives, or in linear attacks on the canvas that furrow channels through it. His imagination may be a heated one but he controls its painterly manifestations with uncanny coolness, being essentially a virtuoso precisionist. Were one to have a reservation about this work, that would be about his putting on a bit too much of a virtuoso display. Still, the excitement remains, as well as the tonic effects of the means at his disposal.

A Gentle Observer

Work such as the above lies light years away in spirit from still-life and landscape paintings by Loretta Howard at the Graham Gallery, 1014 Madison Avenue at 79th Street. In these paintings of immediate, even obvious, appeal she focuses uncomplicatedly on the sensuous pleasures implied in flowers, sunshine, nature's detailed foreground and her blue distances. Painters have been having a go at such celebrations for a good long time now and jaded tastes may wonder whether they can still be washed for gold.

On this point Mrs. Howard is reassuring. She has, in a sober way, something close to an ecstatic feeling about what she sees, a response in which her "feathery" touch is not at all amiss. In fact she comes close to Derain, with whose work hers has distinct affinities. Where she misses that boat can be laid to timidity of color which fails to glow, correct enough representationally but altogether too cool and too correct.

Italians vs. Americans

An international challenge takes place in the exhibition of black-and-white drawings by contemporary Italian and American artists at the D'Arcy Gallery, 1091 Madison Avenue at 82d Street. They number 22 in all and the honors are about evenly divided. Generalizations may be risky but it is not incorrect to state that the Americans are more abstract and intellectual and the Italians more "engaged" and concerned with social significance. It is good to see here that Vespignani has lost nothing in recent work of his mordant, Piranesi up-to-date falvor, or that Bruno Caruso's satire bites hard into the structure of society, or that Ugo Attardi has learned well his Goya lesson. But that this style is not the sole property of the Italians is made clear in Robert Birmelin's drawings which betray the influence of Guttuso in their earthy visual gusto. Nor

International Selection of Painting and Sculpture in Local Galleries

to be overlooked on the home team are Philipp Pearlstein, Charles Cajori and Leo Manso. They, and others, make the show well worth going to see.

No mere figure of speech, the muse instigating A. Wojciechowski's dream-like semi-abstract paintings at Cordier & Ekstrom, 978 Madison Avenue at 76th Street is a spiritual presence. I suspect the "guidance" of the late Pavel Tchelitchew, so closely do these capricious, eerily charming, metamorphic subjects resemble his own work. At any rate they have a wonderful Russian fairy tale quality to them, and might, indeed, be décors for an early Diaghilev ballet.

VERY good art and very bad art make writing about them absurd. Mary Bauermeister is better than very good and I wish it could be left at that. However, it can't be, since the next question is "Who is Mary Bauermeister?"—a good question since she's never been heard of over here, except as a whisper among museum directors.

Mary Bauermeister is a young (30) and brilliant surrealist from Frankfurt who has had quite a big success in Europe. Five of her works (plus some drawings) are now at the Bonino Gallery, 7 West 57th Street, along with the rest of this new gallery's stable. To dismiss the rest rather more abruptly than they deserve, Mario Pucciarelli is an excellent abstract expressionist collagist, and José Antonio Fernandez-Muro is a good para-pop (art classifications are becoming more and

more like biology) symbolist, who plays a pretty telling game with raised X's, circles and squares. Other names are Castelli, Rodriguez (sculptors, nothing exceptional) and an unclassifiable abstractionist, Harold Town, whose huge pieces occupy a puzzling vacuum with superb confidence. But to get back, gratefully, to Miss Bauermeister.

Fabulous

All her works show a brilliant imagination crawling scribbling, jumping and hopscotching all over them. In fact the main thing that ties a very diverse group of five works together is this fabulous quality of lyric invention. She does marvelous things with polished stones, battalions of standing straws, hollow bones and shells, all starting on what could be vaguely referred to as a picture plane, which they then ignore as they clamber out of it. Her best piece is a linen screen about 8 feet tall, illuminated from within and fascinating from front and back, with round paper door, sewn into it, festooned with delicately trailing strings, alive with tiny written messages—a sort of surrealist map of moralities, instructions, opinions, and Dada "Ja-Nein" patterned verse. It is a distant modern cousin of Marcel Duchamp's glassy "Bride Stripped Bare" with the same exquisite care devoted to something highly perishable. Miss Bauermeister's construction looks as though a number of people had worked on it, all diminishing in size to a tiny manikin who took care of the magic writing on the structure provided by the

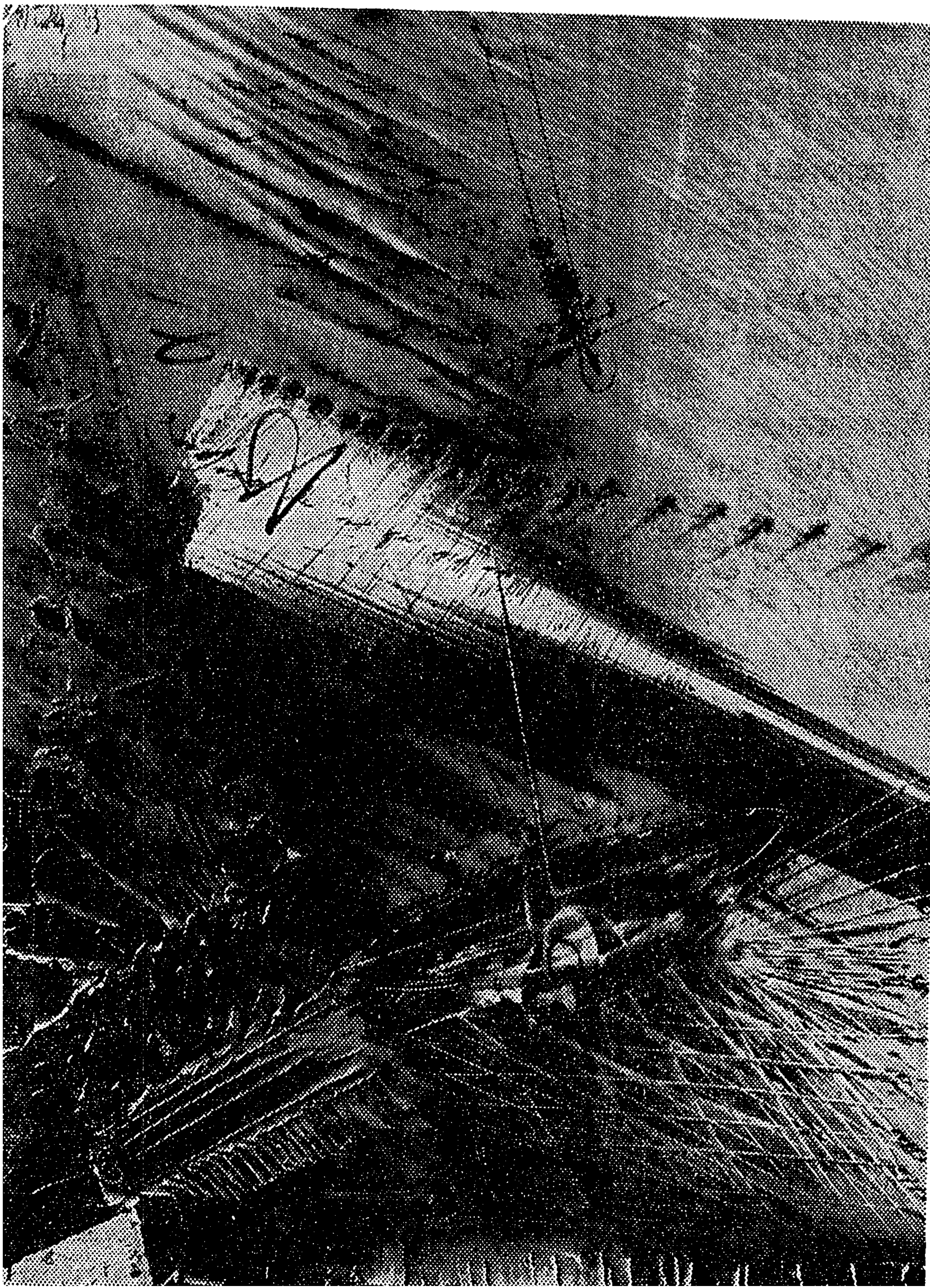
bigger builders. The work becomes a sort of trick psychological mirror that puts the spectator through exhilarating changes in size.

It will be interesting to see if she has the intelligence and cunning to cope with the major success she is obviously going to have.

If "Who is Mary Bauermeister?" is a good question, so is "Who is Kusama?" Kusama is a young Japanese girl, now living here, who has been industriously reconditioning old furniture with a sort of avant-garde mold that sprouts close-packed fingers or phalli or cucumbers or whatever, depending on the associations of the observer. These protuberances, always bleached plaster-white, have invaded a real rowboat set up in holy seclusion in a dim chamber at the Gertrude Stein Gallery, 24 East 81st Street. Of equal importance is what happens before you get to see the boat. For a dark antechamber is wallpapered with a single photograph of the boat, repeated endlessly. The repetitive babble of this single image prepares one for the majestic life-size prototype inside. And around the spot-lit boat, the aggregation of single images again papering the walls comes back at one like a series of telescoped echoes.

This genuine, obscurely poetic event should not be dismissed as a surrealist caper. Kusama has produced an object and an environment that are weirdly moving. Without the environment, or shrine, or atmosphere, her surrealist sprouting objects are unremarkable. With the appropriate environment, they swing in a way that opens the imagination to wonder and deliberate awe.

BRIAN O'DOHERTY.



BEYOND THE BEYOND—"No. 40," oil, by Philipp Weichberger, among his new paintings in a one-man exhibition now being held at the Galerie Internationale.