

ARTWEEK

# PAINTING THE HUMAN CLAY

Venice / Robert L. Pincus

There have been opportunities to see British work in southern California, but they have been rare. In 1968 the UCLA gallery, under the late Frederick Wight, organized a fairly ambitious show of contemporary British painting and sculpture. And, five years ago, LACMA's exhibition, *European Painting in The Seventies*, featured a large proportion of British painters. Many of these same painters are again being shown in *This Knot Of Life*, a two-part exhibition of current British painting and drawing, at L.A. Louver Gallery.

This exhibition is an ambitious one for a gallery, and its effectiveness — both in presentation and in thematic coherence — is the result of Peter Goulds' strong affinity for the artists' work and concerns. R.B. Kitaj's essay, *The Human Clay*, reprinted in abridged form in the catalog for the show, perhaps best captures these concerns. "If some of us wish to practice art for art's sake alone, so be it," writes Kitaj, "but good pictures, great pictures, will be made to which many modest lives can respond." Herein he succinctly expresses the thematic thread that connects both parts of this exhibition. These artists — in part one, William Coldstream, Lucian Freud, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin and Euan Uglow — are all concerned, in varying degrees, with the human figure and its landscape. (Kitaj, as well as Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Peter Blake and Leon Kossoff, make up part two.)

It is Hockney who provides a point of departure for the west coast viewer, because while his paintings have reverberations of fauvist and postimpressionist coloration, his subject matter is local: for example, Santa Monica Boulevard (landscape) and Divine (portrait). Yet more than his use of color — which seems more appropriate to southern California than England — his precise draftsmanship offers the connection, technically speaking, between his work and that of the others.

Coldstream, the oldest and most esthetically conservative of the group, represents this concern to an extreme. *Girl At A Window* and *Seated Nude* are highly representational, both in color and in form, but plans of line, curve and plane — as mapped out — are



DAVID HOCKNEY: DIVINE, 1979, acrylic on canvas, 60"x 60", at L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice. Photo: Frank J. Thomas.

also part of the finished product. These portraits are akin, in mood, to those of Andrew Wyeth, and resemble them in color, if not in form. Uglow is equally concerned with line and even more so with plane than Coldstream. In *Nude With Lake Lugano* the lake exists as an overpowering aqua-green square that rises like a wall behind the formally constructed figure at the bottom of the canvas, and it nearly crowds the lakeside background off the canvas.

Freud's drawings and sketches are drafted with equal precision, but are more expressionistic in content. The themes are tortured and dark. *Girl With A Monkey*, in which the girl strikes an uncanny resemblance to Freud, conveys a tense surreality, reminiscent, in effect, to that created by the incongruity of beings in a Magritte — all in a charcoal drawing, economically executed.

Only Hodgkin, who presents a landscape in wide bands and blotches of color, stands apart from this concern with draftsmanship. A muddy and mysterious abstract painting, *In Alexander Street*, provides an explanation for this difference of technical approach through a different approach to subject matter, as expressed in the title: he, more than Hockney, Coldstream, Uglow or Freud, chooses to be amid the scene, rather than detached from it.

Yet those artists' detachment is, to one degree or another, fairly traditional. It is not technologically influenced, as are the photorealists, superrealists, et al. One might say that these artists look backward, with all due regard to their twentieth century self-consciousness. W.H. Auden crystallizes the matter in the following lines, quoted on occasion by Hockney and used by Kitaj to create the title for his essay: "To me, art's subject is the human clay/ And landscape but a background to a torso/ Cezanne's apples I would give away/ For a small Goya or a Daumier." For those who wish to partake of this sensibility, these British artists provide an exemplary manifestation. And *This Knot Of Life* provides an exemplary installation of their work. □