

# Art: The Apprenticeship Of Stuart Davis as a Cubist

By ROBERTA SMITH

IT might be said that Stuart Davis's career was a protracted love affair with Cubism that began well and ended better. The end is well known: the bright conglomerations of jagged forms, meandering lines and cursive writing that Davis painted in the decade before his death in 1964 are among the last masterpieces built upon a Cubist foundation. But the story of Davis's beginnings during the decade following World War I constitutes one of the best-kept secrets of early American modernism. At the moment, two of its chapters are being told in a pair of small, focused exhibitions at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries Inc. and the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris.

At Salander-O'Reilly, William C. Agee, who is the author of a forthcoming catalogue raisonné of Davis's work, has organized an exhibition of paintings from 1922 to 1924 titled "Stuart Davis: The Breakthrough Years." In a sense, the show covers the roughest part of Davis's apprenticeship to Cubism, and it vividly reflects both the extent of his ambition and the difficulty of his task.

One can sense Davis's determination to finish each canvas, to learn from every effort and to emerge with a living, breathing painting to show for his labors. Mostly he succeeds, but often just barely. For example, the centerpiece of the exhibition is a trio of mostly brown, virtually unknown, Cubist still lifes. As the work of a young American painter who had never been to Europe, these paintings are very impressive. But they are also overbuilt and underlighted, altogether lacking in Davis's deft pictorial structure and strong palette.

The exhibition is actually livelier around the edges, in less crucial skirmishes with Cubism: in the simpler still lifes, in a series of small fragmented landscapes with delicately dappled overlapping planes. The show's true highlight may well be "Untitled (E.A.T.)," a relatively large canvas from 1922 in which Davis leaves his worries behind and vaults ahead a couple of decades. This highly abstract, vaguely lettered composition in black, white and tan has an ironed-out Cubism that diagrams Davis's late work and is also strangely in step with early Abstract Expressionism — Robert Motherwell's, for example. It reflects the experimental brilliance of the young Stuart Davis as well as the surprises lurking in his oeuvre.

"Stuart Davis: An American in Paris" is the name of the exhibition that Lewis Kachur has organized for the Whitney's satellite gallery at the Philip Morris building. This show zeroes in on Davis's use of a single motif: the stage set-like street scenes he encountered during his first and only trip to Paris in 1928-29. By that time, Davis had endured the self-imposed rigors of his "Eggbeater" series to master Cubism; he nailed the subject to a table and painted it for an entire year. Now, his feeling for the houses of Paris, with their stuccoed walls, wrought-iron balconies, shop signs and arched arcades, inspired him to unleash his analytic powers on the world beyond the studio.

As this exhibition makes marvelously apparent, Davis extrapolated from what he saw a system of abstract representation, of animated line against tilting color planes that would, in one form or another, serve him for the rest of his life. In numerous works from the late 20's, the show traces the evolution of various motifs from drawing to lithograph to painting. Again we sense Davis's methodical determination, but now the method is his own and it is capable of singular expansion. The extent of that expansion is brought home by the inclusion of two late works — the big red, white and blue painting titled "The Paris Bit" of 1959 and its only slightly smaller oil study from 1957-60. They follow, nearly to the letter, the motifs of much smaller drawings from 1928, reiterating them in the grand scale and thickened lines of Davis's last years.

"Stuart Davis: The Breakthrough Years" is on view at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries Inc., 22 East 80th Street, through Dec. 26; "Stuart Davis: An American in Paris" can be seen at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 42d Street at Park Avenue, through Dec. 10.

## John Baldessari

Sonnabend Gallery  
420 West Broadway (at Spring Street)  
Through tomorrow

John Baldessari's influence on 1980's art, especially on the strategy of appropriation, has yet to be reckoned with. But in the meantime, his own development continues impressively. Mr. Baldessari practices a particularly lean kind of photomontage, splicing together elliptical narratives from Hollywood film stills and magazine clips, cropping and reorganizing images as if they were words in a dictionary.

This year, Mr. Baldessari has added more color. Certain images are tinted, such as the stack, on the righthand side of "Two Stories," of different chase scenes occurring in fields of tall grass that are now all the same shade of green. More frequently, the images are decorated with spheres of opaque handpainted color, usually placed over people's faces; this introduces an element of abstraction but also of sensualism, as if the innocent — or guilty — are being protected.

Mr. Baldessari likes to weave to-



"Still Life With Dial" (1922) from "Stuart Davis: The Breakthrough Years," at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries.

gether different degrees of drama, action or tension. In "Column (With Duelists)," an image of swordsmen is split by one of a long line of soldiers and their prostrate victims; thus the fight for private honor becomes literally peripheral to collective violence. In the work titled "Planets (Chairs, Observer, White Paper)," an innocent image of planets is flanked by those of two men who are victims of gravity and in grave situations. On one side is Jack Lemmon, bound and tied to a chair lying on the floor; on the other is a man who has just fallen out of a wheelchair. Here, as throughout this show, Mr. Baldessari both challenges and encourages the mind's tendency to seek meaning everywhere. Each image fragment is a clue, each work is an exercise in deciphering, a rebus in which the artist provides only partial guidance.

## Siah Armajani

Max Protetch Gallery  
560 Broadway (at Prince Street)  
Through Dec. 5

In a sense, Siah Armajani is going back to basics. He has dispensed with the elaborate quotations, both architectural and literary, that characterized his previous works. His new pieces, devoid of words or accompanying texts, focus on relatively simple presentations of material and structure. All titled "Elements," the three pieces on view strike one as little more than temporarily stacked arrangements of contrasting, seemingly abstract parts. But because these parts are evocative, a vocabulary is established and a discussion unfolds.

In two of these pieces, material such as bricks or corrugated plastic rests on trays of steel or wood as if waiting for workmen to carry them off. In the third, "Elements No. 10," stained-glass windows reminiscent of those designed by Frank Lloyd Wright form the backs of chairlike structures whose seats in turn support a slab of steel that is both a table top and a loading dock. In "Elements No. 11," there's a play between corrugated plastic and corrugated steel, and between wooden elements reminiscent of orange crates and similar structures made in the corrugated steel.

As before, Mr. Armajani's work occupies the area where architecture, furniture and sculpture overlap. There, it discourses on the nature of building and buildings, the difference between labor and design and between the industrial present and the rural past. This show seems transitional, but it signals an important change: in becoming plainer and more silent, Mr. Armajani's work has somehow become more legible.

## Pedro Figari

William Beadleston Inc.  
60 East 91st Street  
Through Dec. 12

Those New Yorkers who, like this writer, missed Pedro Figari's retrospective at the Center for Inter-American Relations last year, now have a second chance — an exhibition of nearly 40 of the paintings that this extraordinary diplomat-turned-artist made during the last 17 years of his life. Figari, a Uruguayan lawyer, did not devote himself fully to painting until 1921, when he was 60 years old. Already well traveled, he spent several years in Paris where he must have seen the work of the Nabis. He swiftly translated their soft colors and smudged surfaces into local terms, heightening the Nabis' palette and emboldening their patterns to depict scenes of plantation life. He was especially drawn to the dances and social rituals of Uruguayans of Spanish and African descent alike.

A master of body language and moving fabric, of color and robust brushwork and of the anonymous yet personable face-as-mask, Figari made paintings whose charm does not undermine their substance. His best images convey a sense of pulsating communal life unlike anything his Parisian counterparts had in mind. It is as if the young Fauvist Matisse, the painter of "Joie de Vivre," had joined forces with the Goya of the late black paintings. Bright and cheerful, these canvases also have, in miniature, a phantasmagoric grandeur.