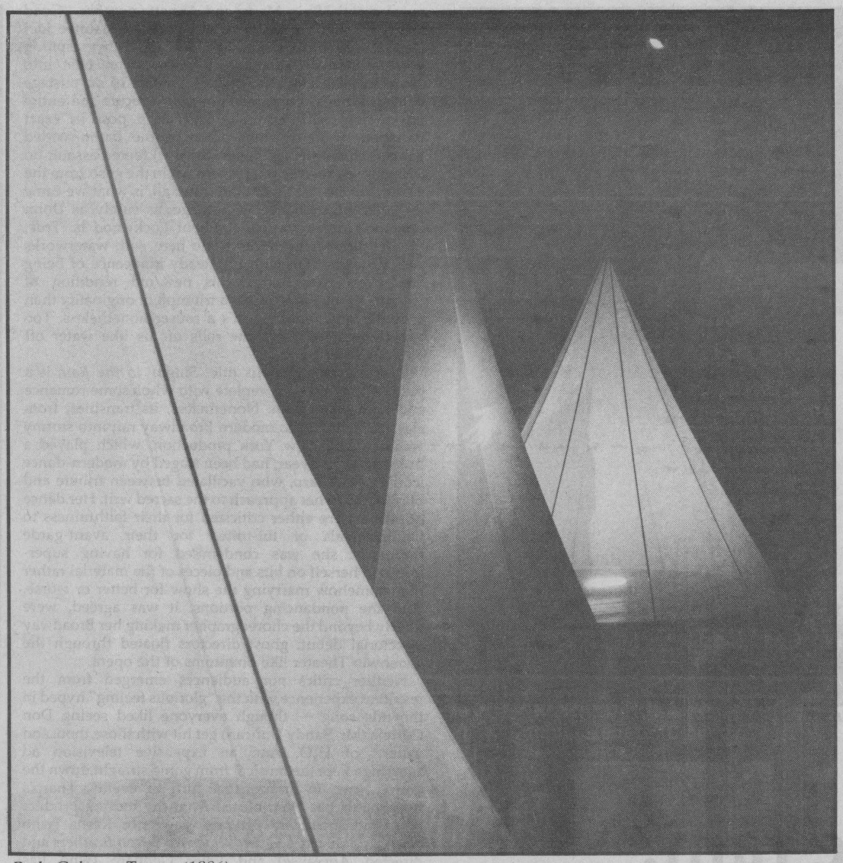

Beth Galston, Tepee *(1986)*

Art

On and off the street

Listening to galleries' September songs

by David Bonetti

Most of us probably haven't gotten all the sand out of our shoes yet, but the Boston art-gallery season has begun, and, at the Stavaridis Gallery at least, with a big bang.

At the openings and parties where art people gather, you can still occasionally hear a certain nostalgia for the generation of artists who came together in this city in the early 1970s. That group has dispersed, but it seems to me that two of its members, Katherine Porter and Norman Toynton (whose residencies in Boston barely overlapped) have made and continue to make art that is essential to our visual culture. Porter is celebrated despite following the peripatetic pattern that her fellow Maine-based artist, Marsden Hartley, set in refusing to settle in New York City and play its games. After nearly a decade here, Toynton left Boston in 1983, for rural Vermont and New York City, yet he remains obscure. Although his work and Porter's are very different, they do share a radical vision of painting. Looking at their best works you get the sense that in the process of putting paint on canvas (or in Toynton's case pegboard) the artist comes to terms with the world and releases meaning to share with the sympathetic observer. When experience — and its communication — is the painter's subject, he or she must be totally honest, without compromise or irony (though there is always room for humor). This need for truth explains some of Porter's awkward passages, which a less honest painter could easily "correct." That the larger world should overlook Toynton is not odd; the surprise is that it pays attention at all to Porter. When it wakes up and discovers what it has been missing, I suppose there'll be the same embarrassed rewriting of art history that occurred when New Yorkers discovered Joseph Cornell, who had been living among them unnoticed for years. If there are any potential painters out there who want to find a path away from image and style appropriation and toward creativity and an art based in ethics, they could find no better model than these two.

I first saw Norman Toynton's work in 1977 at the ICA, in an installation that was as austere and rigorously intelligent as you would expect from late Minimalism. I was led to that work and introduced to its conceptual mysteries by a review by Ken Baker (my predecessor at the *Phoenix*), who has written about Toynton on several occasions, most cogently in the September 1981 *Artforum*. At the time I had no expectation of becoming an art critic, and I looked at the installation unconsciously; yet it has remained in my memory these past nine years while works by more highly celebrated artists have faded. It was constructed of unpainted pegboard, a common-denominator building material Toynton has remained true to even though his interests have returned to painting and its possibilities. That's what's most impressive about Toynton — his conservatism and his loyalty. Each step of his career is based on his past work, and if the current exhibition of his new paintings at the Stavaradis Gallery (through October 4) seems a sensuous celebration of color, the seeds of that efflorescence were present in earlier works, waiting for the right moment to germinate. Neither has Toynton repudiated his previous, conceptual concerns. The pegboard ground remains a reminder of the banality of all basic building materials; the grid implicit in the regularity of its holes, which violates its surface, affirms its flatness. Toynton has been painting directly on the pegboard surface for some time, and if he now builds up that surface with polytek and rubber, he still adds square "frames" of wood to the surface by means appropriate to pegboard: the L-hooks through which one attaches objects to the board.

Toynton's new work places conceptualism and physicality in high tension. *Hawkwood* is a serial work of six 18-inch-square pegboards with their wooden "frames" applied to the surface at an angle. Accepting that configuration as a given, Toynton plays brilliantly with illusionism and perspective, painting "shadows" cast by the frame on the flat pegboard surface and setting up a perspective (when the piece is viewed from the side) reminiscent of a Baroque colonnade. He also plays with color: the mood changes when the predominant purples and dark blues of the front give way to a radiant orange at the side. And he continues to make subtle references to (*not* appropriations from) art history. *Hawkwood* must allude to Uccello's painting of Sir John Hawkwood in Florence's Duomo, an illusionistic substitute for the marble statue Donatello never began — perhaps because the three flat but projecting consoles of the shelf that holds the monument in Uccello's mural prefigure Toynton's projecting frames. *Amersfoort,* a two-panel relief, is named for Mondrian's birthplace, and the piece, based predominantly on the primary colors Mondrian preferred, is an homage, Toynton's sacrilegious diagonals notwithstanding.

Those artists who worked in Boston in the '70s had to struggle with an indifferent support system often suspicious of talent living just around the corner. The situation couldn't be more different today — now galleries vie with one another for the newest and hottest artists emerging from the local art schools. The Barbara Krakow Gallery opens its fall season with "Three Young Artists in Boston" (through October 1). David Ortins was my pick for Best of Show at the ICA's disappointing "Boston Now" exhibition [illegible] his quietist abstractions, lovingly built up with beeswax, dry pigment, and oil paint, continue to satisfy. Reminiscent of Swiss painter Helmut Federle's homages to Malevich and Mondrian, Ortins's works accept abstract painting as the appropriate vehicle for spiritual revelation. His latest paintings are bolder in color than those he showed at the ICA, but they're just as assured.

In case you didn't make it out to Georges Island for Jerry Beck's recent extravaganza, he has produced a domesticated variation of his own contribution to that multimedia evening. Here it's entitled *Still Life.* Beck has constructed a chamber in the gallery, and in it he displays a suite of granite-foam bedroom furniture with the accouterments of an art-obsessed life in clear evidence — sheets of slides on the bureau, a copy of Janson's *History of Art* on the beside table, and walls covered with empty gold-leaf frames. Each picture is labeled: *Surrealism, Minimalism, Realism,* for instance, after art movements, but also *Catholicism, Imperialism,* and *Materialism,* after the philosophies that guide our lives. Beck tries so hard to analyse the role art plays in our contemporary consciousness, his work verges toward sociology and away from art.

The third young artist exhibited at Krakow is Alan Michelson, whose pine-needle-feather-and-twig-encrusted oil paintings in the Neo-Expressionist style are informed by Anselm Kiefer. Having discovered that he had a Native American heritage, Michelson set out to explore its myths and images; the latter include eagles, buffaloes, rattlesnakes, Western mesas, and the pinewood forests of the South. In *The Four Directions,* his most ambitious work, four square canvases occupy the cardinal points of the compass, which held symbolic meaning for Native Americans: North was associated with wisdom, South with innocence, East with introspection, West with illumination. Michelson relates these associations through image and color, thus combining the Western painting tradition with the buried power of the Third World.

Suzanne Higgins, in her first one-person show ("Nature and Idea") at the Stux Gallery (through September 27), establishes herself as a major new realist painter, in fact the first punk-realist I've seen. Her realism goes beyond the boring, déjà vu quality of most of that moribund tradition through its kinky content, which brings to mind Gregory Gillespie and Catherine Murphy. *Adam* offers a sleazy, country version of a punkster; his greasy hair stands up on the top and hangs lifelessly from the sides, like pelts, right down to the shoulders of his burgundy wool/polyester-blend-with-metallic-thread suit, which is a high-buttoned and shapeless cloth coffin, as the current retro style demands. Adam holds a copy of *Adam, A Man's Home Companion,* a "comic" book on a pornographic theme, which offers, according to its cover, discussions of "Sex in the Twilight World" (a good description of the milieu Higgins documents), "Can a Man Be Raped?", and "Dames and Taxes." What confounds the impression of contemporary vacuity is Higgins's technique. While her classmates were learning to drip paint on their jeans in a convincing manner, Higgins learned the laborious techniques of traditional panel painting. *Adam,* like most of her new works, transcends the materialist terms of realism by referring to the idealist tradition of the Italian Renaissance. *Adam*'s frame as well as its ground is gold leaf over gesso on which an elaborate quatrefoil pattern has been hand-hammered. Adam stands in an illusionistic, nichelike space on a ledge of *faux marbre,* the treatment turning him into a representative of contemporary *virtú* on the model of, say, Donatello's St. George — a sculpture that stands in a real niche on the façade of Florence's Orsanmichele. The resemblance may not be coincidental: St. George is in Catholic theology analogous to the original Adam, the father of us all, including this ludicrous man in Higgins's painting. Of course, our contemporary Adam has no dragon to slay to prove himself. He is instead a lady killer — a total reversal in a world that has turned upside down several times since the days of Donatello and could use a good shaking-up even now.

Higgins's *Self-Portrait,* also on a gold ground, reveals a young woman less tough and nasty than she would like to be. Despite the tattoo and the cheap costume jewelry, this lady is really a pussycat, and her painting carries too strongly an *épatez le bourgeois* message. Higgins is saying, "Look, ma, I'm hanging out with all the people you warned me about," but who cares? Still, at 24, she has defined a part of the real world as her own territory, and that is an accomplishment.

In *Tepee,* an environmental light sculpture at the Kingston Gallery (through September 21), Beth Galston has built seven tepees of gauze and aluminum rods aglow with tenuous and subtle light. But after her 1985 environmental piece, *Overlay,* it's a disappointment. Although three doors are cut so the observer can enter three of the tepees, this show is really about objects in space — the traditional subject of sculpture. Galston's past work was more radical than that, raising basic questions about the nature of perception. *Overlay* was a visually cleansing experience; stripped of iconography, and with no content other than vision itself, it provided a powerful example of art reduced to its essence. What you saw was what you saw, and the result told you how far you could push the process of perception. These tepees have iconographic, ethnological, and historical implications that get in the way of what Galston does best. Still, this is a beautiful installation, an experiment by an intelligent artist whose pieces never fall into a formula, and well worth a trip to this gallery, which is on the edge of Chinatown. Galston's work calls for interaction on the physical level as well as the perceptual, and it is good news to hear that the Massachusetts Council has awarded her (along with video artist Ellen Sebring and choreographer Sarah Skaggs) a "New Works" grant to create *Aviary,* a multidisciplinary theater piece to be shown locally next year. □