

ORTMAN

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By BRIAN O'DOHERTY

GEORGE ORTMAN'S unique painting-constructions — new examples of which are at the Howard Wise Gallery, 50 West 57th Street — are by now classics in modern American art, and never was the name "classic" more apt. For his work is assembled from a superstructure of geometry that is eventually taken down — so that the common heraldry guiding our everyday lives plays calmly (and absurdly) on our conditioned reflexes: arrows, stars, crosses, circles, hearts, clubs, diamonds. They are so fixed into the constructions that they assume a meaning as elusive as their symbolism is obvious.

Common symbols in an uncommon situation, they play a sort of concertina of extremes: everyday and esoteric, distant and immediate, ancient and modern, universal and specific. Ortman handles them with a slow and slightly baffled sense of their immense age and their immense vitality. This gravity, augmented by pure symbolic color, makes him a symbolic classicist, as for instance, Piero was, and like Piero, one with a deep interest in the structural basis of composition.

Here one discovers that Ortman, a most conscientious investigator of what he is doing, is engaged in a geometer's search for the source of his symbols. In his last

show he attempted to relate the symbols to the human figure — ending up with unconvincing relationships but with a source of new motifs. Currently he is anatomising the composition and psychological motivations of old masters, notably Botticelli's "Primavera" and Gauguin's "Where do we come from?...", discovering the harmonics of the Botticelli and the intuitive schema of the Gauguin.

Symbolic Logic

These discoveries, and the reconstructed, anatomised paintings which are his laboratory of exploration, are not in themselves important — except to Ortman. For by reducing the old masters to a sort of computer-style, symbolic logic he has found a source of endless renewal for his symbols and compositions. The centerpiece of the "Primavera" becomes a geometer's ideal — a majestic yellow arrow defined by interrupted circles and outer darkness, a new departure in his art and one of the best things he has done. It is a marvellously original example of art feeding on art and of thoroughly genuine art springing triumphantly from doubtful premises.

This is reminiscent of the Yeatsian practice of a framework of ideas, themselves questionable, as a basis for creations which, when finished, can survive completely without these ideas, a practice that enables an artist to create hard realities from il-

lusions by pretending the illusions are true — a very modern relationship between means and end.

Ortman's symbols are also frequently constructed separately on small canvasses in-laid into the larger one, the lips and edges of these in-lays tilted slightly to emphasize the constructed aspect. Here one comes to the fundamental effect of his art. His symbols, deprived of function, become not symbols or signs (i.e. things standing for or referring to something else) but things. His painting-constructions become not icons but objects. Symbol and sign are stripped down to their inner identity, a sort of object-identity, and the mystery of the symbol becomes the mystery of the thing.

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