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Cover: Judy Rifka's "A. Museum," 1982
The Fires of J.M.W. Turner/Rifka, the Parthenon & Postmodernism/Ray Johnson
First Havana Biennial/New Southern Museums/Albright's Self-Portraits
Panza Collection Update/Special Book Section/Review of Exhibitions





Judy Rifka: On Acropolis III, 1983, oil on linen, 50 1/4 by 74 1/4 by 4 1/4 inches. Brooke Alexander Gallery.

Judy Rifka and “Postmodernism” in Architecture

Using Rifka's Parthenon paintings as his prism, the author illuminates many moments in the strange family of classicism, examining works from Mannerism to Minimalism, Pop to the present. Like some classicizing art today, the result is a tour de force of references.



Frederic E. Church: *The Parthenon*, 1871, oil on canvas, 44 3/16 by 72 1/8 inches, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

BY JOSEPH MASHECK

Voici la machine à émouvoir.
—Le Corbusier, on the Parthenon

A new advertisement presents itself in certain parts of town just as I ponder Judy Rifka's Parthenon paintings and "postmodern" appropriations of classical ornament in architecture. A bottle of Dewar's "White Label" scotch stands solemn atop the capital of a gravely drawn Doric column whose abacus is carved in Spanish with the inscription, "THE CLASSIC SCOTCH." Graphically, the poster extends a convention of identifying the enduring claims of "quality" with the classic orders of architecture, here the traditionally very masculine Doric—a convention to be found already flourishing on the very title page of Winckelmann's *Remarks on Ancient Art* (published 1763, dated 1764). The Dewar's ad, which has so far appeared only in Spanish, *sells classicism*, including a sense of the classic as a "class act," just as much current

"postmodern" architecture trades in tokens of (plutocratic) certainty amid thinly disguised fear and cheaply masked esthetic poverty.

Judy Rifka's paintings of the Parthenon, that absolute home plate of classicism, come out of the same situation yet hardly out of the same artistic bag. Rifka practically gives away the Parthenon—all the Parthenons anyone could want—yet still manages, her spicy iconoclasm notwithstanding, to avoid simply negating it. Her mix-and-match, remaindered Parthenons, Parthenons as if on sale, are still as much Parthenons as that Wurlitzer Valhalla of a *Parthenon* by Frederic Church. Typically for this hurried nevertheless ultra-cool painter of dizzy, shattered pictorial effects, the image of the ancient building is for Rifka not just "available" but concisely telling, invested like some tiny chip from information science with the heaviest mystique of classicism. In her Parthenon paintings, and inescapably in her formidable painted *Wall* construction (1983), in which the Temple of Hatshepsut skids along



Dewar's "White Label" Its Smoothness Never Varies. On the pediment: THE CLASSIC SCOTCH. Photo courtesy Adelante Advertising.

with the Parthenon image over a multiplicity of canvas planes (like the faces of shifted ashlar blocks on the Acropolis itself, as Rifka has ob-

served), the architectural image comes and goes in a way that perfectly suits the pseudo-prehistoric, disoriented human forms flying through them like deer hunters in a cave painting. Unavoidably, in the face of this, one confronts big issues of history, not mere style, while, naughtily enough, any single image may still bop irresponsibly in or out of the "composition" (funny word in the context).

Rifka's images are painted from already loosely drawn and projected acetate transparencies that have been slid around and piled up at the whim of the artist. And because some of the apparently most abstract accompanying markings are in fact painted separately and then (mock-)cynically

The very recklessness of Rifka's Parthenons advances a sense of classicism as a healthy wellspring grounded in earth and life—a sense that most "classicists" seem able only to desire.

slapped in blatant "detachment" onto the wet paint, there is at work here an aspect of literal superficiality reminiscent of television imagery. Such an easy-come, easy-go approach really suggests that, despite what one often hears, the "first television generation" is not now 25 or 30 but more like 40, and its formative visual experience was essentially in dreamy, but distanced and "documentary," black-and-white. Rifka's nimble images throw around the mental tonnage in exactly this way—with some color added in for kicks, like a plastic "color" filter pressed onto the old Dumont screen. Warhol's early imagery operated in somewhat the same way, and of course his supposedly ironically callous, or callously ironic factory-made repeats find their echo in the Parthenons-by-the-yard of Rifka's *Museum Wallpaper* canvases. (Warhol seemed to be fascinated by the inevitably wrong or "off" colors of earlier video color.) But what really distinguishes the new "false" imagery advanced by Rifka is a marked skepticism: Many folks who watched the Army-McCarthy hearing simply thought they showed that McCarthy



Judy Rifka: *Museum Wallpaper*, 1982, oil on linen; 7 panels, each 96 by 24 by 3 inches. Brooke

was right; it was critical, television-wise, that Edward R. Murrow was also "live." Now, however, we have youth who grew up with television as visual baby-formula, including even that choke or digestive repeat that can spark critical consciousness. Hence the possibility of "superficial" Parthenons, insofar as the Parthenon is one more culture fetish, like those supposedly uncommercial public-television programs with classy, one-word, corporate advertisements. Hence, too, the possibility of Wölflin's sublimely pure "opticality" as a cheap delusion (a possibility all the youngsters seem to recognize), and even of something like a completely pseudo-representational, substantially "abstract," form

of painting like Rifka's.

As for the historical consideration of the Parthenon and the career of its mystique: consideration could begin all over again with Ciriaco d'Ancona's once precious, now amusingly over-confident, little sketch of the temple, especially in the hilariously sloppy version of the same image from later in the 15th century (Codex Manzoni). All the didactic classicism that straightened everything out to the point of dogma over the next three centuries is probably less timely, except as material for a neo-Mannerism in architecture today, than the romance which proposes the Parthenon as the sweet-



Alexander Gallery.

test souvenir of the most golden of ages, a souvenir whose supposed mar-morean whiteness (taken for granted until Hittorff's revelation of its polychromy, around 1830) only heightened its Hegelian ideality. The same Chateaubriand who in *Génie du christianisme* (1802) praises the rather Rifka-like way ruined classical temples slap their columns against the sky (V.iv), arrived at Athens in 1806 to see the sights and was delighted to be shown his quarters: "What a pleasure for me to be put up in Athens in a room full of plaster casts from the Parthenon!" (*Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*).

Romantic archeology found a technical ally in the *camera lucida*, whose

capacity to dissolve a view into a field of competing details has its parallel in Rifka's use of projected acetate working drawings. The device also has, of course, a place in the prehistory of photography. One great practitioner was Frederick Catherwood, who worked in Egypt around 1830 (when Hatshepsut's temple was still unexcavated) and later with John Lloyd Stephens at the sites they discovered in the Yucatán—the results of the latter expedition appearing as illustrations in Stephens's famous *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* (1843). For all their topographical and archeological precision, Catherwood's *camera lucida* drawings possess a Xerox-like, mechanical equalization of intensities

that yields an effect of brittle thinness; indeed they look distinctly artificial, almost as artificial, in their own way, as Rifka's voluptuously painted stereotypical image.

Flaubert went to Egypt with the photographer Maxime du Camp at the mid-century. Du Camp's pursuit of archeological facticity bored his friend, whose laid-back accounts of the trip concern an eroticized land refreshingly removed from European conventionality. Flaubert, more at home in this Egypt of the moment, wrote to his mother in April of 1850, from a typically esthetic vantage: "Gods with heads of ibises and crocodiles are painted on walls white with the droppings of the birds of prey that nest between the stones. We walk among the columns; . . . we stir up this old dust; through holes in the temple walls we see the incredibly blue sky. . . . *This is the essence of Egypt.* . . . We are always dazzled [by the light] in the towns—it is like the butterfly colors of an immense costume ball; the white, yellow or blue clothes stand out in the transparent air—blatant tones that would make any painter faint away" (trans. F. Steegmuller). Here one might think, in connection with Rifka's Parthenon paintings, not only of her specific palette but even of her punctures through one color layer to another ("through holes [in white walls] . . . we see . . . blue").

Taking the kind of subjective delight Flaubert did in the most esthetic experience of antiquity—regarding it not as an array of battered models of perfection, nor as material for scientific study, but rather as, even in wreckage, stimulating an experience of sophisticated charm—has distant affinities with Mannerism, as represented, for example, by Giulio Romano's famous spectacle of classical architecture painted in a state of collapse in the Hall of the Giants of the Palazzo del Te (the "Tea Palace") at Mantua. Wölfflin, not surprisingly, gave Giulio's murals the brush-off, though his terms have positive interest where he speaks of a "pleasure found in treating matter with violence" that "could only lead to a tendency to amorphousness": in the Hall of the Giants form, perish the thought, "is completely annihilated," with "raw, unformed masses" busting in; "everything bursts its bounds and chaos triumphs" (hrumph). Back then, however, Vasari, himself a so-

cations leading up to the influential *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972), produced in collaboration with Brown and Steven Izenour. Tom Wolfe was in there, too, with journalistic belles lettres on Las Vegas published also in 1966—work that serves to underscore the Angeleno essence of the Vegas Strip esthetic that really came to a head with Ed Ruscha's hometown *Sunset Strip* book of the same year.

How different Pop vernacularism was, all along, from American vernacular building as considered, for example, from a modern European standpoint like that of Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's still fascinating *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture of North America*, 1957, or as a part of American cultural history, in the writings of John A. Kouwenhoven, or as an appendix to various historical anti-classicisms within the European tradition, especially those highlighted in Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). Reyner Banham may have been slumming a bit with his *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971); at any rate, soon after, Tony Berlant's sheet-metal, playhouse Greek-temple sculptures, exhibited as "The Marriage of New York and Athens" at the Whitney Museum in 1973, called bouncy L.A.-style attention to New York as shrine-center of Euro-classicist formalism. By the time C. Ray Smith's *Supermannerism* (1977) appeared, one could easily run right to the Palazzo del Te and just use it to license the next packaged style, "Postmodernism," as though all the hoopla over the Mannerist masterpiece were not a '60s phenomenon to begin with.

Philip Johnson's work must have encouraged the new attitude in its stylishness, and to consider it as the work of a Mies van der Rohe disciple is to see it as practically Oedipally reactive. But the real issue is an inverted innocence that amounts to camp, whether in the glittery high-"tack" of the New York State Theater of 1964 or in the stage-set melodrama of Johnson's recent work. Louis Kahn once defined the city as "a place where a small boy, as he walks through it, may see something that will tell him what he wants to do his whole life." That's nice, but now Johnson gives us, as it were, a too literal interpretation of a boy's-eye-view spectacle that I remember well from the postwar years: the masonry grandeur of giant doorways with huge bil-



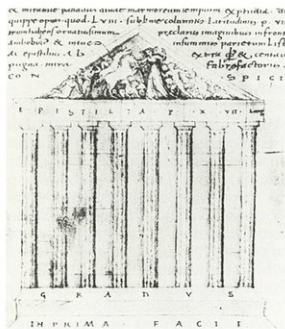
Judy Rifka: Parthenon Night Tapestry (one of two panels), 1983, oil and mesh on linen, 96 by 24 inches. Brooke Alexander Gallery.

lowing flags above; Léger workmen; whistle-blowing traffic cops in brass-buttoned, double-breasted blue melton; spiffy red fire engines à la De-muth with real, whining sirens; lots of

sailors in snappy, real cotton whites—all this and lunch at the Taft with Vincent Lopez at the piano! It was a world that seemed, especially in maternal company, larger than life and fantastic for any boy, as the AT&T building, with its huge doorway at last the size I remember, now always reminds me. I can enjoy the nostalgia, whether it is Johnson's too or only mine, but I find disconcerting the intimidating scale that provokes it.

Actually, much "postmodernism" is marked by a kind of Déco-rococo infatuation with out-of-scale classical detail illiterately disengaged from classical grammar for the fun of high fashion. It is likely that this tendency grows out of a clubby, often wimpy Corinthianism that surfaced in America around the turn of the century as a plutocratic ultra-classical stylishness. McKim, Mead and White held the torch high with their Columbia University campus, where the young Robert A.M. Stern, among others, would eventually tend a dimmed flame. Stern's 1980 renovation of the lounge in Ferris Booth Hall, on the Columbia campus, offers a sort of do-it-yourself plywood, Levittown classicism, said by the architect to be "restating the classical language of the campus in contemporary terms." Stern also says that he doesn't mind being considered an interior decorator, at least to the extent that Stanford White was one (this in conversation with Barbaralee Diamondstein at Parsons in 1981, as reprinted from something called *Interior Design: The New Freedom in Historic Preservation*, Sept.-Oct. 1982). And no wonder, considering the attitude of Edith Wharton and Ogden Codmen Jr., who as decorators were right in there with Stanford White: "It matters not if the connection between base and cornice be maintained by actual pilasters or mouldings, or by their painted or woven imitations. The line, and not the substance, is what the eye demands" (*The Decoration of Houses*, 1897; 2nd ed. 1902, repr. 1978). How's that for proto-postmodernism?

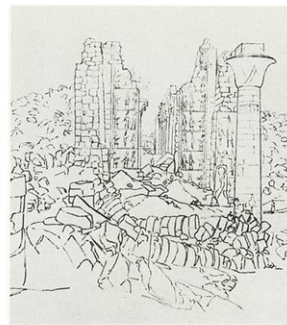
A pertinent example of the turn-of-the-century taste is Beaufort, a house at Gloucester, Mass., started soon after 1900 with quaint transatlantic "cuttings" onto which the rest was grafted. What is remarkable, however, is not the structural conglomeration but the domination of the whole by a fastid-



Parthenon by Ciriaco d'Ancona, from the Codex Hamiltonianus; reprinted in N. Pevsner's *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design*, 1968.



Parthenon copied from Ciriaco d'Ancona, from the Codex Manzoni; reprinted in N. Pevsner's *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design*, 1968.



Frederick Catherwood: Drawing of Ruins at Karnak (detail), 1832. British Museum: Robert Hay Add. Mss. 29826.

phisticated Mannerist, had quite liked the way "the whole of the painting has neither beginning nor end," and had noticed the irony whereby the painted architecture can only seem chaotic because Giulio's control of perspectival effect really is astute. Closer to home, John Shearman, writing in his *Mannerism* (1967) on the same murals, points to a gloss by Francesco Luisino on Horace's *Ars poetica*: Horace having frowned on anything too fantastic, Luisino seized his chance to stress just that affirmatively fictive character in poetry or art that makes the Hall of Giants a tour-de-force not so much of illusion per se as of *manifest artifice*. Thus Shearman can imagine Giulio's contemporaries standing before the great anti-classical architectural paintings "unmoved, except," importantly enough, "for a *frisson* of delight in a particular kind of beauty."

Certainly Mannerism is one root of so-called "postmodernism," but so is the very modern tradition now supposed to be exhausted and defunct. Any Corbusian or Miesian idea that architectural modernity simply extends classical tradition would already have been problematic for Léger—to mention a painter of fresh relevance in light of Rifka. And by 1919 Theo van Doesburg was already claiming, in *Classic, Baroque, Modern*, that "the spirit that conceived the Parthenon is no longer the same spirit that creates a Hall of Turbines, a Larkin Building or a modern dwelling." If the call for new solutions to new problems must have had the sparkle of a new cliché,

Didactic classicism is probably less timely to art and architecture today than the romance which proposes the Parthenon as the sweetest souvenir of the most golden of ages.

it also marks an important discontinuity right where the geometry of classicism might otherwise have elided into functionalist formalism. French purists who made such a fuss about the concept of a modern "spirit" did pursue a classicizing review of functional form, what with the "Duralax" glassware that shows up in their paintings as poor-man's Baccarat, and the whole cult of machine beauty that spun off of French industry's gung-ho morale campaign after World War I. Mainly, this trend substituted a new utilitarian geometricity, consonant with industrialists' "*esprit*," for debased 19th-century academic classicisms (Kenneth Silver has written enlighteningly on the subject). Léger, however, managed more radically to undercut Renaissance humanist idealization of the human figure, while yet preserving its moral import, by converting awesome nobility into the more approachable dignity of ordinary healthy proletarians at ease with their sleek new seltzer bottles. This shift is, in turn, important in the

prehistory of Pop Art, and indeed much "postmodernism" is neo-Pop.

California's emergence, 20 years ago, as a cheerful, prosperous industrial place where everything's at least okay—for visiting fan David Hockney as well as for New Yorkers and locals—had consequences for modern architecture. In the East, Robert Venturi's work of the '60s seemed to share both Pop's taste for the vernacular and Minimalism's literalist approach to material and form, yet the whole esthetic of the Las Vegas Strip is really an offshoot of California Pop. Ed Ruscha's picture books—notably *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1962) and the Hockneyesque *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), with their Pop content and Minimalist structure—were an art-world set-up for the Vegas punch line in architecture. Venturi and Denise Scott Brown took Peter Blake's *God's Own Junkyard* (1964) and said to Blake's by then obsolescent functionalist sense of taste, "Wait a minute, some of this stuff is groovy!" (Like everything else, the Vegas Strip also has a prehistory, including 14-foot-long townscape engravings by Israel Silvestre in the mid-17th century. Ruscha's books have more populist American antecedents in items like Ernest Peterson and Glen Chaffin's 1952 *Sittin' and a-Thinkin'*, a picture book of outhouse photographs with "clever" captions.) Ruscha's picture book of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) fits right in with Venturi's various publi-



Giulio Romano: Hall of the Giants (detail), ca. 1530, in the Palazzo del Te, Mantua.

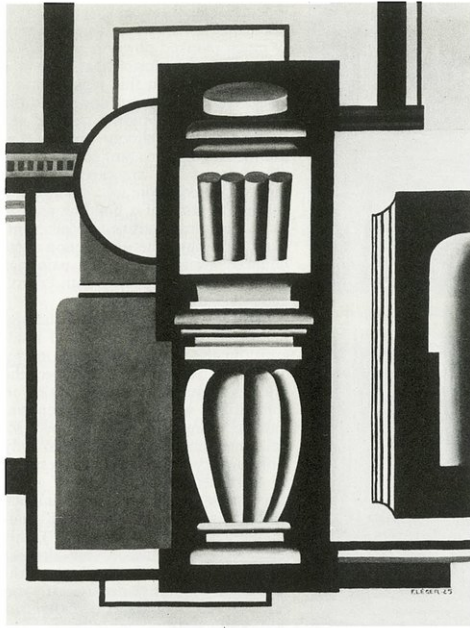
ious decorator's sense of woodwork painted, room by room, in those parfait colors now favored by "postmoderns." A description of one of the fanatically "unified" period rooms in Beauport makes the point unwittingly: "Paneled walls are vibrant with the dark color of eggplant, while against these walls on narrow little shelves, on mantelpiece, on furniture, everywhere glow pieces of old French and China Trade tole as red as embers, traced with delicate designs in gold. . . . In perfect taste the quiet off-white ceiling affords relief. Delicate blood-red lines define all doors and windows and give accent and refinement to this amazing room" (William B. and Elizabeth Clay Blanford, *Beauport Impressions*, 1965).

A like taste, more sporty and tailored, was in vogue between the World Wars, and offers an easier parallel to architectural modernity, which by then was really rolling. (Stern's own pseudo-Corbusian office

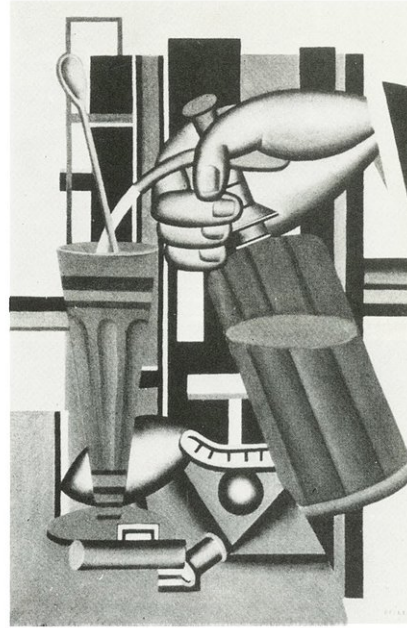
trademark, a stylized frontal humanoid cut-out, is related to Léger's Africanesque curtain for *La Création du Monde*, 1923, as decor, much more closely than to Corbu's semi-ideological "Modular Man"; and in contemporary American art it suggests the emblematic figures of Karl Wirsum, in Chicago.) One finds, from the 1920s and '30s, outlandish inflations of historicizing architectural ornamentation in otherwise vacantly "modern," often vastly overscaled, contexts—most notably in the giant pseudo-classical and white-plume Décorococo plasterwork of '30s movies but also in real ensembles. Only a little less farfetched than the movie sets was Evelyn Waugh's library in his house, Piers Court. This remarkable room, at least by the later 1940s, presented gushily tapering pilaster-ettes with capitals stuck onto the ends of projecting book stacks, while the whole, including plain rectilinear wall panels, was apparently done in a natty

dark-green-and-white color scheme. See the black-and-white photograph by Karsh of Ottawa of E.W. standing squishily in the room, in Frances Donaldson's, *Evelyn Waugh: Portrait of a Country Neighbor*, 1967. Waugh, by the way, is reported by Donaldson to have "loved the architecture of every age except the twentieth century."

Postmodernist buildings like Robert Stern's Lang Residence, in Connecticut, of 1973-74, are quite like Waugh's library in their employment of detached classical quotation or allusion on behalf of conservative and tasteful novelty; besides, they sport a manicured casualness that in a Veblenesque way bespeaks excessive maintenance, especially for fancy polychrome paint jobs. James Wines is no doubt right to retrieve the work of Venturi, Rauch and Brown from such enthusiastically embraced superficiality, seeing their buildings instead as "brilliant and understated inver-



Fernand Léger: *The Baluster*, 1925, oil on canvas, 51 by 38 1/4 inches. Museum of Modern Art.



Léger: *The Siphon*, 1924, oil on canvas, 36 by 23 1/2 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. M.E. Culberg, Chicago.

sions of popular iconography, as opposed to . . . decorative and stylish historical allusions"; their work is "unlike the more recent Post-Modernist spin-offs, with their ersatz historicism and chic polychromed decoration" (*Express*, Fall 1982). Meanwhile, "made-up" versions of classical architectural details have also presented themselves as abstract sculptures, and Rae Berolzheimer's inventive works of this type (her more absorbing pieces differently evoke the Viennese Secession) are already being mobilized as "postmodern" interior-decorative doodads.

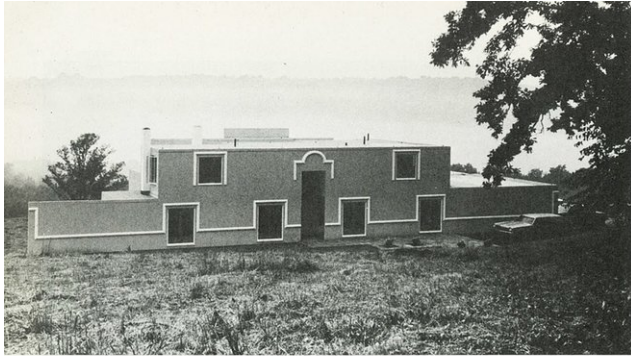
In *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977) Charles Jencks draws on the Venturian concept of the "decorated shed" (which is the opposite of the modernist "duck" building with its claims to semiotic self-evidence) and—in an allusion to both pedimental sculpture and Greek polychromy—proposes that we keep the Greek temple with "its geometric

architecture of elegantly fluted columns" down below and raise up "a riotous billboard of struggling giants above." Interestingly enough, however, he quotes C.R. Cockerell on the terrace houses of John Nash in Regency London in a way that may begin to suggest that Judy Rifka's Parthenon paintings, far from simply swimming in the postmodern mentality, propose a critique of it: "Greek bedevilled . . . scenographic tricks hastily thought, hastily executed"—in other words, jerrybuilt pedantry. Rifka's paintings may look jerrybuilt, may even be about jerrybuilt culture, but they are never pedantic, not even in her early "Minimalist" phase. Wisely, Jencks suggests that Venturi's by now widely influential duck/decorated shed polarity is open to simpleminded, non-dialectical application—as if all it meant were, Sheds in, Ducks out.

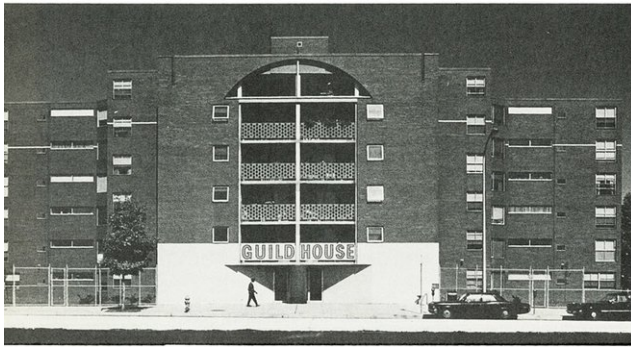
Indeed, things may have come to a point where a creative eclecticism,

busy *within* history (James Stirling's recent buildings and projects would be an example, even if his notion of "representation" is troublesome in theory), distinguishes itself from the necromaniac variety, as well as from any false "originality," oblivious to history. As Leopold Eidlitz saw it, nearly a century ago, "The Architect of Fashion," essentially a businessman *rather than* an artist, momentarily "startles the world by his bold combinations of architectural bric-a-brac," these being "quickly appreciated and admired and as quickly cast aside" (*Architectural Record*, Apr.–June 1894).

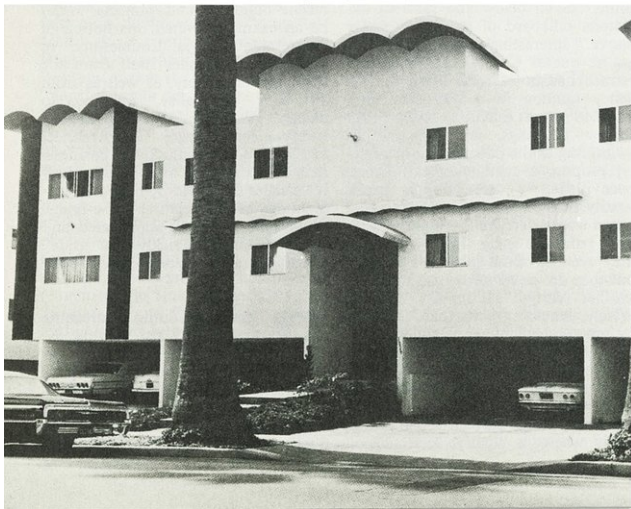
Rifka's skidding, careening Parthenons also remind me that a decade ago Alison and Peter Smithson, in their important *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic 1955–1972* (1973), cut through some Corbusian idealization in suggesting that the Greek Dor-



Robert A.M. Stern: Lang House, Washington, Conn. 1973-74.
Robert Venturi: Guild House, Philadelphia, 1962-63.



Ed Ruscha: 1029 S. Union from Some Los Angeles Apartments, 1965.



ic temple, far from being (puristically) calculated in its siting, was really pretty much plunked down in space: "We came to the conclusion that there was no Greek space in this sense; that is, things were simply put down into the charged void." Finding "space" as such to be post-Baroque anyway, the Smithsons admire the ad hoc way "Greek sites . . . are capable of rising to an occasion; . . . there is a coming together of a building and its site," which may not be altogether unlike the way the Parthenon gets bounced around in Rifka's paintings so as to wind up looking both "right" and totally unengineered.

I still respect the Smithsons' undogmatic way of staying on top of modernity in the face of atomized, freeze-dried historicism, just as I respect the utter fineness of Richard Meier in comparison with, say, the expensive-looking, corporate vulgarity of I.M. Pei. But I am now also drawn to Judy Rifka's very "nowsville" expressions of frustrated intellectuality. If some artists talk theory like Miss America candidates doing their "cultural" vaudeville act ("Am I doing OK?"), this one seems to think: "What does it matter if you understand the Ancients-and-Moderns dispute if you can't do anything about it? (*Might as well smile.*)" The same dilemma has been recently illuminated by a photocopy "conceptual" piece by Peter Nagy, *Passéisme*, a star-shaped, mock-historical "diagram" with tiny textbook-style line drawings of famous monuments arranged in a jumbled pseudo-system of impossible pedigrees and affinities. Rifka, like Venturi and the Smithsons, carries a burden of live historical consciousness, which has become rare; and, like Nagy, she conveys a sense—his cold-blooded, hers more engaged—of the mess that simpleminded historicism, and much else, is in.

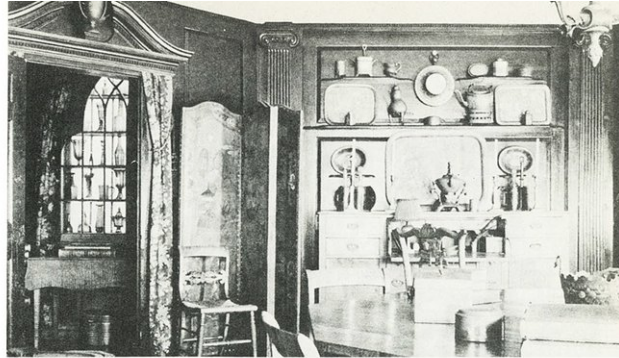
Rifka's Parthenon, far from being simply anomalously classical, serves as a tough foil for her "expressionism." Here her heartily slam-bang American kind of *décadence* really serves to extend a sophisticated modern historicism—though the point, needless to say, is hardly one of "influence." In the course of "original" German Expressionism, Kirchner painted the neoclassical Brandenburg Gate, in Berlin, with its temple-fronted wings jutting out at cockeyed angles from the main block (1915), and Klee later disassembled classical

temple architecture in the elegant formalized dionysian cavorts of a *Tempelfest* (1937). The willing eschewal of "classic" status for her own painting as a product, even when the work deals with the ultimate touchstone of classic architecture, is just what allows Rifka to set the Parthenon dancin' on her terms. In fact, she manages to nullify the mystique of classicism without having to pay it the respect of grounding her irony on it.

The Parthenons constitute only one of Rifka's "fast" series of paintings, though "series" sounds too systematic, since what marks the various sets is only that they have in common motifs whipped up from common

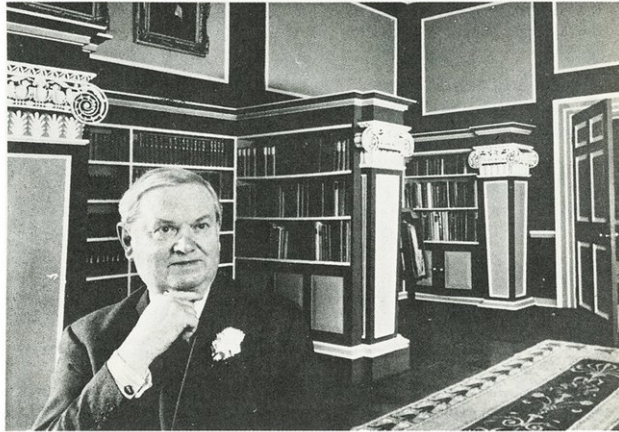
Much "postmodernism" is marked by a kind of Deco-Rococo infatuation with classical detail illiterately disengaged for the fun of high fashion.

sources and slapped down onto the same Carvel-y paint in, mostly, blue, white, some yellow and, for her pre-fabricated appliqué strokes, black. In the case of the Parthenons blue and white happen to be the colors of Greece, but similar colors dominate the other "series": "girls'" pink, "boys'" blue, pastels with remnant "teen" appeal, and plenty of "aqua." Other image groups include dizzy, with-it figures, certain rock personalities (some from the neo-Warholean film *Underground U.S.A.*), outrageously pacific cats and isolated grassy clumps of vegetation. The same or related paintings may also be used in a major installation or assembled into complex canvases held together with seeming insouciance and plastered over with multiple images. To the extent that they are thus related by some single "schtick" or gimmick, like Warhol's also open-ended dollar-bill, Campbell's-soup-can and "star" series, they are generally neo-Pop. Nevertheless, the Parthenon can never be just another item, just another microwave entree in the populist cafeteria of history. Most characteristic of Rifka, in fact, is the way that she betrays, within her irony and shielded by it, a defensive yet poignant sadness



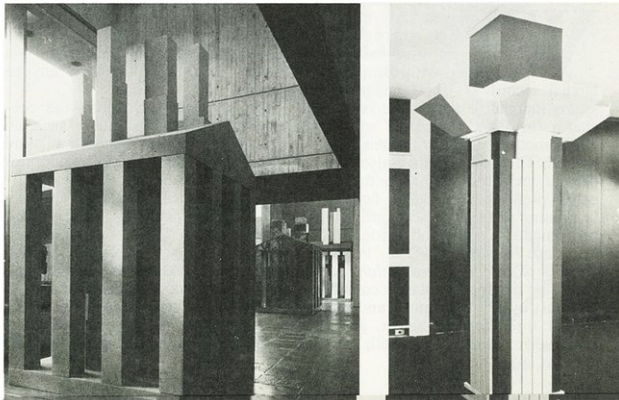
The Octagon Room, Beauport [House], Gloucester, Mass., begun 1908.

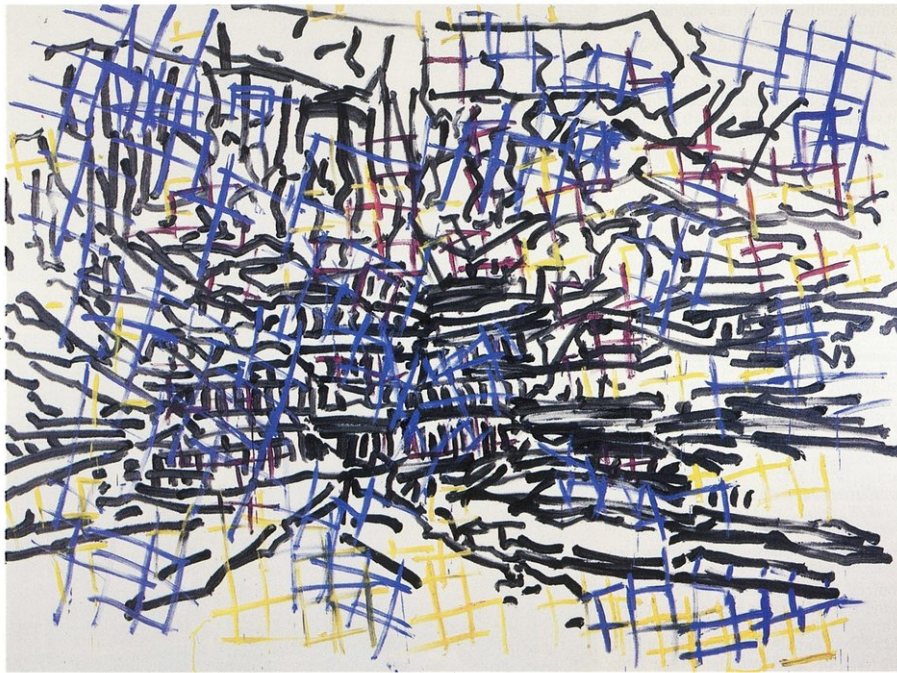
Evelyn [Waugh] Standing in his Library, Piers Court, Gloucestershire. Photo Karsh of Ottawa.



Below left, installation of works by Tony Berlant at the Whitney Museum, Oct. 1973.

Below right, column designed by Robert Stern for Ferris Booth Hall, Columbia University, 1980.





Judy Rifka: Valley of the Queens, 1983, oil on linen, 72 by 96 inches. Brooke Alexander Gallery.

about the way things are that Warhol's by now hardened posture of disengagement cannot encompass in painting (even if it can peep out occasionally in an *Interview* lunch chat).

While such early traveler-artists as Catherwood and du Camp were ostensibly concerned with compiling a factual record of what they saw, it seems inarguable that the mysterious charm (in Marx's word) of antiquity had something to do with their efforts as well. This softer motive also seems present, even dominant, in the delicately pseudo-archeological, fictitiously pristine model classical ruin sculptures made by Anne and Patrick Poiriers since the 1970s. The Poiriers' *Temple of One Hundred Columns*, of 1980, for instance, a plaster construction just over 9 feet square and rising almost three feet in height, gives a thoroughly ideal, "classically" Ro-

mantic bird's-eye-view down onto a vast, imagined hypostyle structure that may, may not, or may as well, have never been. While the Poiriers' interesting work has usually seemed conservative, there are exceptions, like an ambitious ruin model all in black. (I just can't trace who said, "... as black as the Parthenon"—a French Symbolist, or does anyone know?)

More abstractly classical, and conservative only in extending such an established modern tradition, are Walter Dusenbery's recent sculptures derived from, and rather nostalgically evoking, classical columnar architecture—*Due Volte* (1978–79), for example, carved in (too?) elegant travertine. Dusenbery's beautifully crafted garden-sized pieces are problematically tasteful modern heirlooms-to-be, dependent for their modernity on the already guaranteed "classic" status of a Brancusi-Noguchi lineage. Perhaps

the difficulty is that Dusenbery offers refinement as an *end* instead of sophistication in fresh growth. More winning are his ostensibly unarchitectural pieces, in which Dusenbery seems closer to skilled traditional stonemason doing his own thing, like Ruskin's de-alienated artistic guinea pig, the Dubliner named Mr. O'Shea.

Even though Rifka first worked articulately in a Minimalist vein, the neo-Pop aspect of her work is as fascinating as the defended sadness to be found at its core, and it is thanks to Rifka that Michael Hurson's work, which once looked to me like a thinly amusing belated Pop, takes on relevance. Hurson's "Palm Springs" paintings of a decade ago link Warhol's embarrassedly aware cub-scout side—that shock-passed-off-as-cool—with the ultra-superficiality of a television imagery that skids on the surface. Consider (as in *Palm Springs Painting No. 4*, 1971) a stacking of

three more or less identical images that both recalls Warhol—not to mention poolside Hockney—and also suggests a “rolling” image on the video screen. Structurally, the parallels are obvious, not just for the multiple “frames” but also thanks to paint jobs graphically out of registration. Hurson used to make boring little would-be “Minimalist” balsa-wood models of architectural interiors, simpleminded caricatures of the “sterile box” of the speculators’ version of Functionalism. Lately, he has produced images of the classical column: in one drawing, *Composition 1981*, a bulging, fluted Doric column (with a base) extends from top to bottom, as if bearing, like

Like Venturi, Rifka carries a burden of live historical consciousness, conveying a sense of the mess that simple-minded historicism, and much else, is in.

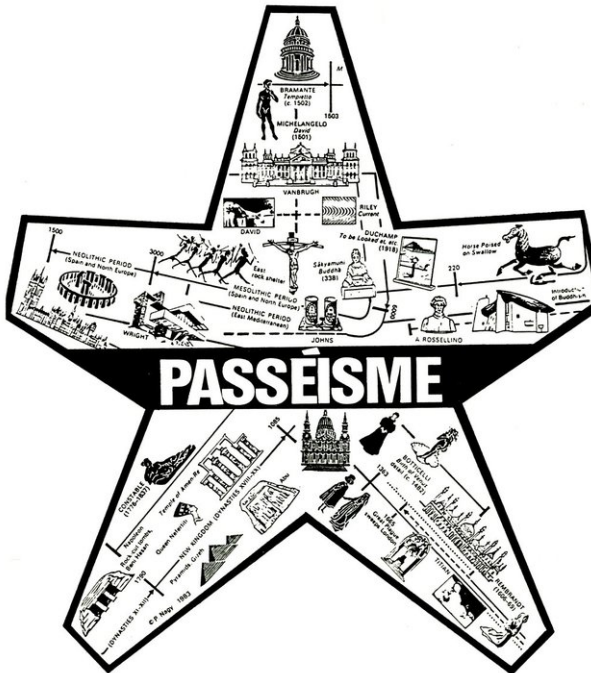
some doubly metaphorical caryatid, the weight of classical form.

The classical temple itself also looms large as a substantive motif in recent drawings by Richard Fleischner. *Archaic Building*, for instance, shows a sophisticated sense of the implicit classicist-modernist issues that still attach to the venerable theme/motif. The Erechtheon-like temple depicted in the drawing lacks both pitched roof and pediment and thus gains an impression of compactness compatible with the modern sense of top and bottom as analogous. There is the suggestion that not only might Fleischner’s “temple,” lacking a pediment, be turned upside down, but also that the thing has a kind of “Minimalistic,” non-relational, anti-“compositional,” maybe even crystalline formal integrity. Yet the drawing itself consists of coarse markings and scribbling so heavy as to seem to pick up, by frottage, the bumpiness of wood beneath the sheet, while a shadow along the flank of the building forms a bowed diagonal that might as well parody drawings by Malevich or some compositions of Ellsworth Kelly. However much such crudities may be the product of aimless vogue, here they evoke a sense, possibly even Heideggerean, of the Greek temple as

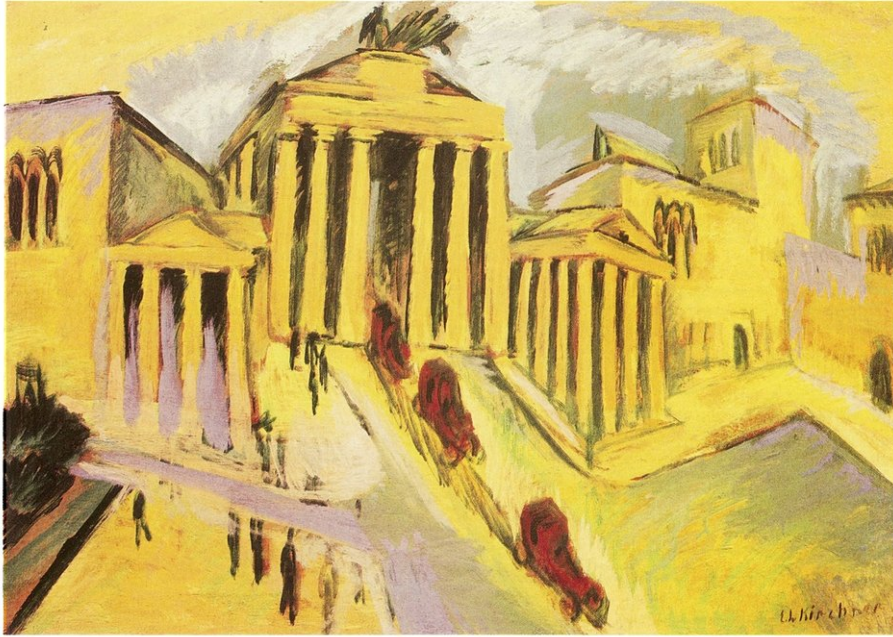
bursting up *archaically* from the very earth—which is to say that they may be profounder than they simply look.

Despite the floating, desensitized kind of classical imagery that has lately become fashionable in painting as well as architecture, certain younger artists show knowing, critically distanced understandings of such forms in their historical poignancy. Thus in an untitled ink drawing of 1981 John Miller restores to the motif of the freestanding columnar monument of Romantic Classicism a sense of the observing soul suspended in a melancholy nature. Distant hills are rendered here by means of draftsman’s dotted transfer shading, cut and pressed casually right over inked lines so as to produce an effect of dreamy artificiality and intimate, chamber-scaled moodiness, as in some Romantic piano *étude* reminiscing over clas-

sicism. Meanwhile a form along the right-hand edge and one less obvious at the left suggest picturesquely framing landscape rock masses. In a wholly different key or mode, a Doric column seems to blast out of its own crisp containing form as drawn by Steven Parrino: classicism at wit’s end. Out of a column’s capital bursts a tiny figure, in red, of a “Superhero,” not unlike Athena herself emerging full-blown from the head of Zeus. Miller’s drawing sums up for me the nostalgia of the classical as always available yet by now, too, as ever bygone, whereas Parrino’s drawings announce on a wittily toylike scale a virtually Nietzschean outburst of spirit from within the cool forms of Apollonian restraint. In Miller’s novel-of-sorts, *Contamination* (Cave Canem Books, 1981), illustrated with some of his drawings (which also evoke some of the 1920s who deserves revival, Jean Charlot), a Corinthian col-



Peter Nagy: *Passéisme*, 1983, Xerox copy, 11 by 8 1/2 inches.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Brandenburg Gate, Berlin, 1915, oil on canvas, 20 by 27 1/2 inches. Private collection; photo courtesy E.V. Thaw.

Paul Klee: Tempelfest, 1937, oil and encaustic on canvas, 12 3/4 by 18 3/4 inches. Marisa del Re.



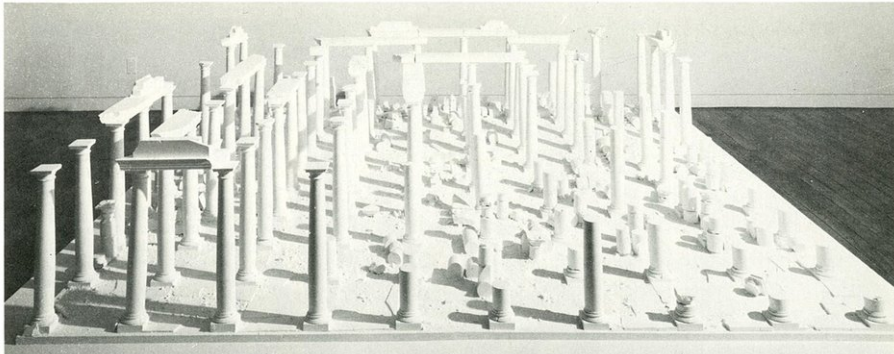
umn is personally addressed with mock profundity: "Column, column, column, what vestiges of antiquity spring from thy brow? You impene-

trable one. You who know more than we. You of geometric perfection. You who refuse to shave"—followed by, "(It is clearly a product of a bygone

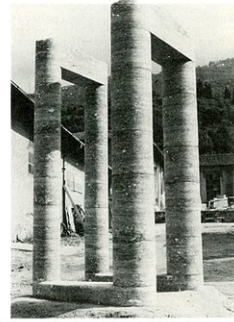
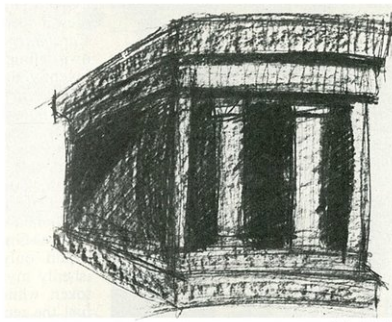
era)." One might think of the Venturi dictum "I Am a Monument."

Just as Miller's Neo-Romantic-Classicism seems to have all the time in the world, many of Rifka's images seem "fast," almost fast enough to outrun intellection—as when words are shot at us from a screen so fast we are just barely able to read them. This makes for an "allover" effect that pertains to figure and image rather than to composition—which, in turn, means that the painting attains to a unity of its own that is neither classically given nor classically contrived. And while the Parthenon loses only its mystique, none of its true classical sufficiency (the Parthenon can "take it"), Rifka's own jittery agitation can find its own serene harmonic.

Exactly because the Parthenon can be put through such a workout—or actually make that workout possible—Rifka's work as a whole can stand to testify against the abuse of art as consumable commodity. Without capitalizing on the image, except insofar as it is inexhaustible, she gives away the



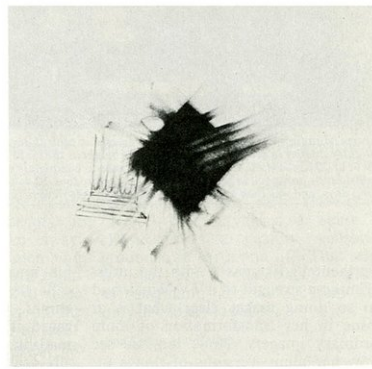
Anne and Patrick Poirier: The Temple of One Hundred Columns, 1980, plaster constructions on wood base, 34 1/2 by 109 by 109 inches. Sonnabend Gallery.



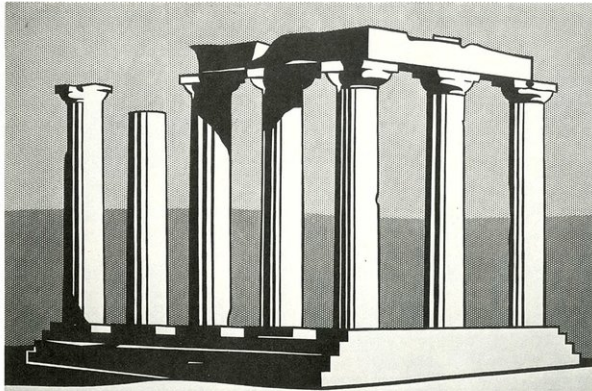
Left, Michael Hurson: Composition 1981, 1981, pencil, pastel, ink, conte crayon on paper, 33 by 16 3/4 inches; Paula Cooper Gallery. Center, Richard Fleischner: Archaic Building, n.d., graphite on paper. Right, Walter Dusenbery: Due Volte, 1978-79, gray travertine, 91 1/2 by 45 1/2 by 41 inches.



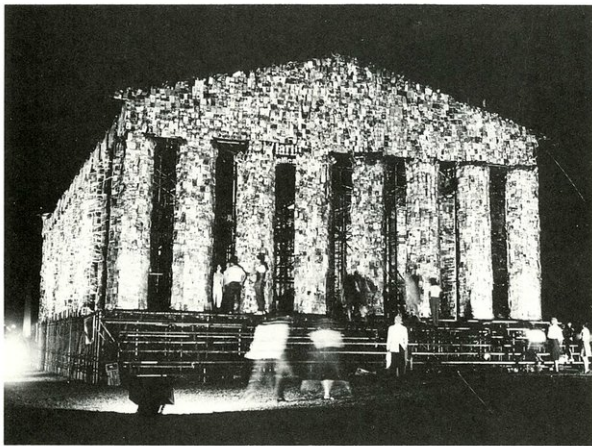
John Miller: Untitled, 1981, ink and transfer shading on paper, 9 by 12 inches. Metro Pictures.



Steven Parrino: drawing from an untitled series, 1982-83, charcoal on paper, 8 inches square. Damon Brandt Gallery.



Roy Lichtenstein: Temple of Apollo, 1964, magma, oil on canvas, 94 by 128 inches. Castelli Gallery.



Marta Minujin's Parthenon of Books was erected in central Buenos Aires in December 1983. Slightly smaller in ground plan but the same height as the real Parthenon, it measured 49 1/4 by 131 1/4 by 49 1/4 feet. A skeleton of steel was completely covered by 25,000 books individually packaged in plastic bags. The structure took 17 days to build, was on view for 5 days, and was then overturned by a crane so that viewers could take the books.

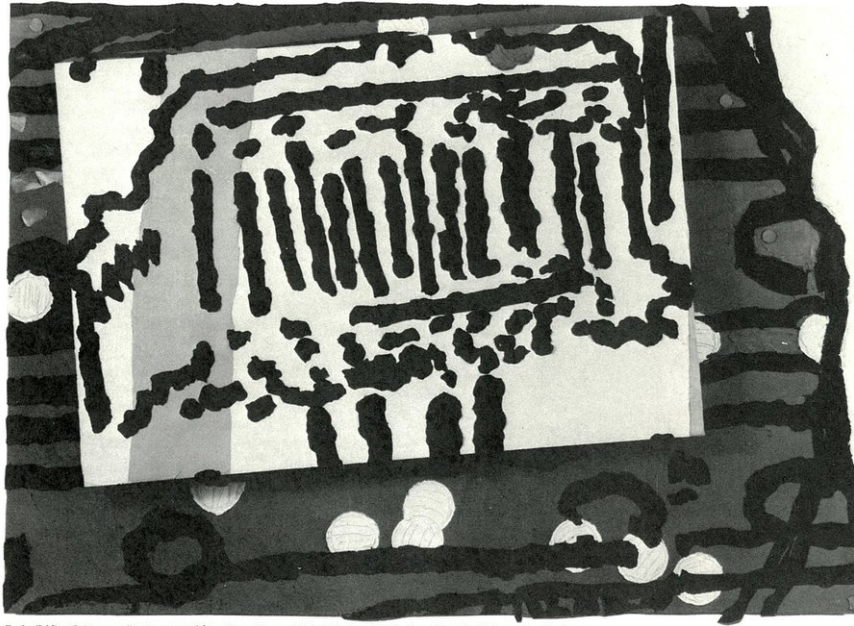
Parthenon's likenesses with the indiscriminate strength of a TV signal, and in so doing makes clear what is at issue in her transformation of more ordinary imagery. Now, too, we see how her many versions of things utterly contradict Warhol rather than follow in his tracks: the slapdash in

his repeated images endearingly recalls the slapdash of badly run machines, or of piecework and disengaged, if not stoned, mechanical workmanship. Rifka, however, doesn't really make replications at all, and instead seems to have as much fun in painting any one Parthenon as in

painting any other. Hence, from the other end of the artistic process, that of "consumption," any one piece of the same action is complete and fundamentally unique, though still not fetishized as such.

Fredric Jameson has called attention to the scene in Godard's *Les Carabiniers* where the "new world conquerors exhibit their spoils," but, "unlike Alexander, they merely own the images of everything, and triumphantly display their photos of the Coliseum, the pyramids, Wall Street, Angkor Wat, like so many dirty pictures." This principle he expands to encompass a categorical "American tourist" snapshooting common landscape and thereby "graphically transforming space into its own material image" (*Social Text*, Winter 1979). Here Jameson seems to miss one point. The *Carabiniers* sequence, as Jameson's own telling reveals, would seem most urgently to concern the readiness of cultural monuments to serve as regalia of power and rule. How Roman it all is, and only American to the extent that America may seem Roman, this symbolic concession that the stock exchange is a kind of throne room, or that if you only *took* the Parthenon militarily you would thereby *have* Greece (in fact, of course, you would only have your own diminishedly mythic Greece). By the same token, while Rifka's many Parthenons fuel the repute of the temple as sheer *image*, there could be no harm in that except to an Athena-worshipper shocked at the debasement of her sacred cult. Moreover, and most critical for Rifka's work *as painting*, the diffuse handling of the supposedly reified image within any one painting advances just what Jameson calls the "polysemous," so that, in his terms, the image avoids being arranged in contrivedly (and hierarchically determined) consumable fashion, like some pimped commodity: "the materialization of this or that sector or zone . . . comes to constitute an end and . . . a consumption-satisfaction around which the rest of the work is 'degraded' to the status of sheer means."

In this way (which is not as simple as Benjamin's notion that photography undercuts an image's aura, of which we have heard so much), what Rifka does, far from simply "appropriating" the Parthenon, in effect can



Judy Rifka: Museum Postcard, 1982, oil on linen, 72 by 102 by 8 1/2 inches. Brooke Alexander Gallery.

only liberate it from any more manipulative appropriation, as by the powers-that-be cults of classicism. So, as a pure image, signifying if anything only what must always be fine in the amplest myth of Greece, the Parthenon gets to float free in Rifka's processed likenesses, free as so many pieces of Adriatic seaweed, thin, translucent, rubbery and virtually natural in its proliferate and inexhaustible fertility. Pop Parthenons by Lichtenstein are only high-styled toys by comparison, businesslike in facture, altogether rationalistic in their smoothly oiled humor, mechanically graphical in the sense (close to Benjamin's) of being published, whereas Rifka's Parthenons are (politely) subversive, like purloined photocopies of some precious manuscript text. Or rather, variously handmade renditions, none claiming priority, is what they are, these separately "taken" likenesses that are as though pulled, with some sort of adhesive stuff on them, from an unin-

timidatingly person-scaled life—one in which paint runs or gets brush-hairs in it and then finger-marks from the artist picking them out. (Rifka's pushing of lengths of mesh right into the goo of the paint has the amusingly desperate ad-hoc character of some emergency household hint.)

In a beautiful essay called "Summer in Algiers" (1936) the now unfashionable Camus speaks of the Algerian "haste to live that borders on waste," whereby "everything is given to be taken away." Camus is getting at a kind of dionysian, wildflower classicism in which even the beauty of youth is luxuriously thrown away: "During their entire youth men find here a life in proportion to their beauty. Then, later on, the downhill slope and obscurity. They wagered on the flesh, but knowing they were to lose." Right here, it happens, is one of the most concise and intense modern restatements of the virility of the Doric order of the Parthenon itself; for if

such creatures seem to have the luxury of living for a few years wholly in the present, "without myths, without solace," in a state of headily self-conscious beauty, they have, just so, such a "haste to live" that "if an art were to be born here it would obey that hatred of permanence that made the Dorians fashion their first column in wood" (trans. J. O'Brien). It is, likewise, the very recklessness of Rifka's Parthenons—a recklessness which is, after all, not so unlike the crudely unaccustomed, but also uninhibited, renderings of the early traveler to Greece—that advances a sense of classicism as a healthy wellspring grounded in earth and life. That sense is what most "classicists," perhaps Winckelmann above all, seem able only helplessly to *desire*. □

For Arthur and Barbara

Author: Joseph Masheck, who teaches at Harvard, recently published *Historical Present: Essays of the 1970s* (U.M.I. Research Press).