

NATURE AND ART

Whitney Show Traces Abstract Paths

By HOWARD DEVREE

IN its current show, "Nature in Abstraction," the Whitney Museum has taken a long step forward. Instead of merely presenting a cross section of what is being done, John I. H. Baur, curator, has assembled an exhibition of unusually high quality to demonstrate how and why modern artists are using new approaches to immemorial inspiration.

Some approaches are much more direct and specific than others but not based on mere representation. Some are more indirect depending rather on the subconscious and the automatic. Some find equivalents for a mood or an experience in color, light or subtle suggestion. Some make references to nature so obliquely, subtly and personally that the work of art becomes cryptic and not readily accessible to others. Some have felt in the light of recent scientific developments that a completely new attitude toward nature has been called for. New techniques have been devised to express these new approaches with the result that ends and means have sometimes been confused.

What emerges as a sort of common denominator in the great diversity of expressions, Mr. Baur finds, is a searching attempt to get at the essence of the thing to be expressed rather than any external semblance. "In its character," he concludes, "most of our abstract painting and sculpture pays small fealty to the concepts of those pure abstractionists who hold that the work of art should be a completely meaningful object in itself, of solely esthetic significance, hermetically sealed against all other associations." At the other pole mere realism has been rejected. Perhaps a subsequent exhibition may take up man and the man-made world which are outside the scope of the present inquiry.

As background for the show, which includes forty-eight paintings and ten pieces of sculpture, such pioneering examples are included as Stella's still modern-looking 1914 cascade of fragmented color called "Spring;" and a characteristically and pertinently titled Marin—"Movement—Sea or Mountain, as You Will," indicative of the artist's attitude toward an impression based in interpretation of nature. Following these a division—with necessary overlapping—has been made into "The Land and the Waters," "Light, Sky and Air," and "Cycles of Life and Season" to indicate major concerns of the artists in basic sources of inspiration.

Color and Image

Dominant in all three divisions is color, whether used in a loosely symbolic manner as in Loren MacIver's lumina-like interpretation of landscape, Philip Guston's sensitive but enigmatic untitled canvas, and I. Rice Pereira's modified geometric "Spring, Twelve O'Clock"; or whether color practically takes the place of actual forms as in Lawrence Calcagno's "Blue Landscape," and in Hyde Solomon's massive "Vermont Autumn." Imagery transformed to the artist's purpose is to be found in such diverse paintings as Joan Mitchell's beautifully suggested "Hemlock," Karl Knath's "Winter Wharf" and Leo Gatch's brilliant "Greenhouse."

Highly imaginative and very personal interpretations include three storm theme variations—one in blazing color by Angelo Ippolito, one low-keyed and reminiscent of the coast by Balcomb Greene and one packed with suggestion in its blend of lyric color and linear elements by Perle Fine. There are mysterious evocations of mood in Kyle Morris' "No. 2, 1956," in Norman Lewis' "Night Walk" and in James Penney's "Pines, Night." Evocative also of recognizable sources of inspiration are Gabor Peterdi's "Tidal," Kenzo Okada's sparsely subtle



PERSONAL VISION—"The Storm Departs," by Perle Fine, in the Whitney Museum exhibition of contemporary work, "Nature and Abstraction."

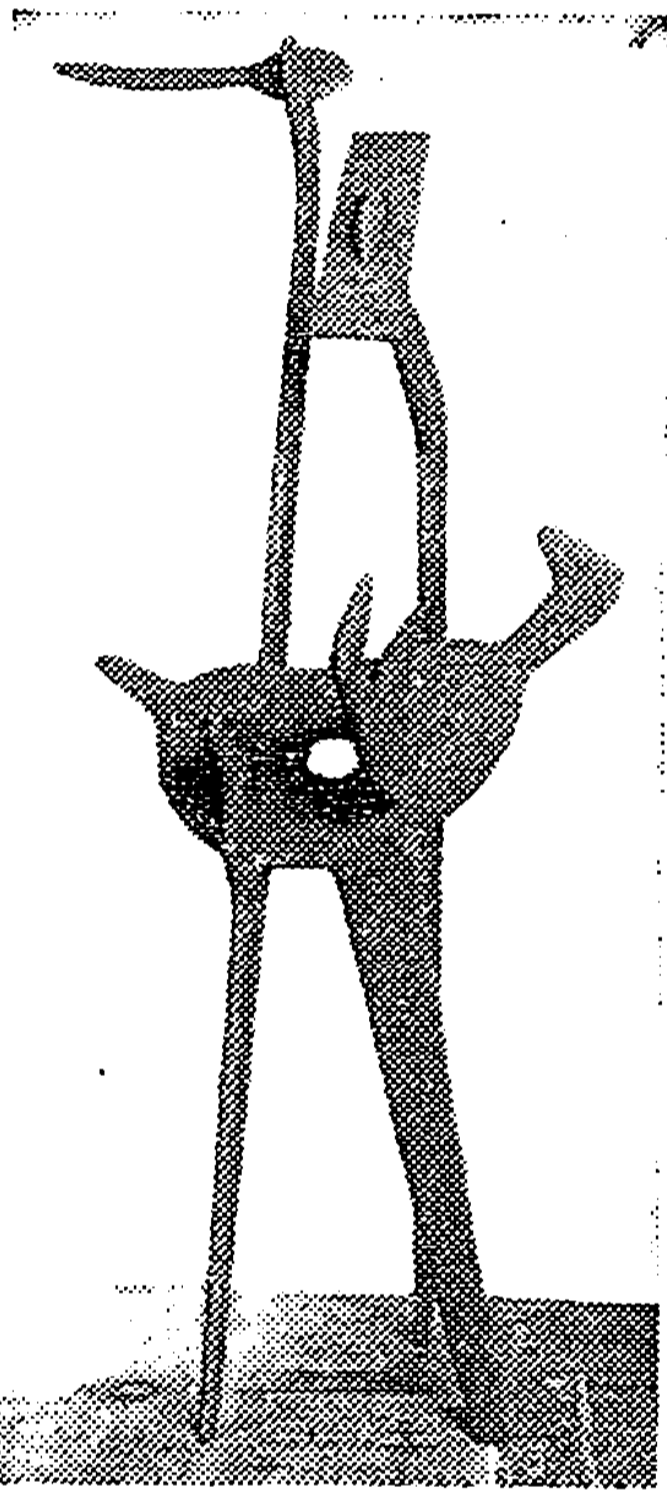


BY AN AMERICAN PORTRAITIST—"The Actress," by Thomas Eakins, in exhibition at the American Academy.

"Snow Mountain," Richard Pousette-Dart's "Golden Dawn" and Jon Schueler's feathery "Evening."

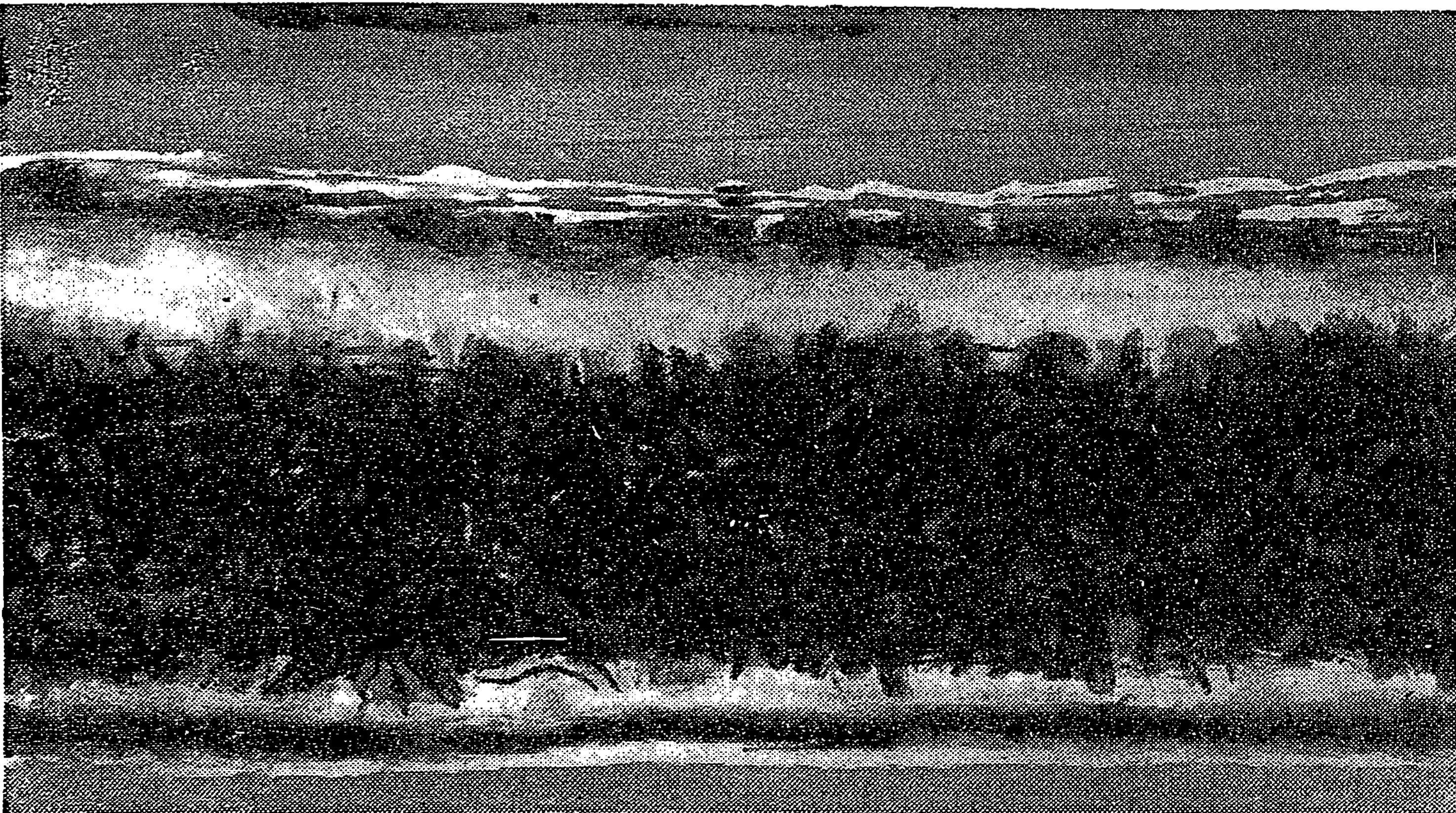
More remote from a recognizable source of inspiration are such paintings as Rosemarie Beck's "House of the Moon," Mark Tobey's "Drift of Summer" with its palimpsest linear network and Philip Guston's untitled understatement. And not represented at all are the numerous abstract artists who assert their paintings are summoned up from the subconscious, the automatic and the accidental. But this show has decided impact and makes its points well.

In much of the recent painting inspired by nature an oriental influence has been pro-



BY MODERN—"Unknown Bird," slate, by Isamu Noguchi, at Whitney Museum.

nounced. In connection with the Whitney show it is of special interest to note the paintings by Tadashi Sato, a Hawaiian artist, at the Willard Gallery. Economy of means in line, color and form can hardly go farther than in this work. A pale orb and a pointed projection from the side of the canvas, both in off-white monochrome, may be supplemented by a single broken line between and he summons up a hazy coastwise scene; or, at the most, touches of pale greenish gray and whitish blue are called upon to reinforce the off-whites. A network of fine branching Y-shaped lines suggests inimitably the stir of the surface of water. It is almost too simple seeming but is strangely effective without resort to the color and vigor of most occidental abstraction.



ABSTRACT INTERPRETATION—"Blue Landscape," by Lawrence Calcagno, in current exhibition at Whitney Museum.