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*Palettes Full of Ideas About What Painting Should Be*

By ROBERTA SMITH NOV. 1, 1996

NEW YORK CITY has many things in quantity, and one is surely painting. Moving through its many museums and galleries, you can encounter works by masters long dead and living. You can see brand new works by young unknowns and those of painters who have toiled for years in relative obscurity. They all conspire to make New York one of the world's great centers of painting, and of the debate about painting. For every painting is, among other things, an argument about what painting should be.

At the moment, painting is especially visible, even by New York standards, so the debate is unusually pitched, almost an esthetic war zone. Most prominent, of course, are the major museum retrospectives that bring two of the medium's elder statesmen head to head: Jasper Johns's brooding ambiguities of image and surface, at the Museum of Modern Art, are locked in spirited exchange with Ellsworth Kelly's sometimes dazzling purities of form and color at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Other participants in the debate in Manhattan range from Lucian Freud at Aquavella to Gerhard Richter at Marian Goodman and Eric Fischl at Mary Boone. And, from beyond the grave, from Max Beckmann at the SoHo Guggenheim to Jean-Michel Basquiat at Tony Shafrazi, with Philip Guston at David McKee and Edwin Dickinson at Tibor de Nagy falling somewhere between.

And this is only the top layer. All over town, younger or less well known painters are putting forth their best arguments in the form of painting shows, and it's great fun to get caught in the crossfire. Here is a sampling of those exhibitions.

Louise Fishman

Louise Fishman's argument for a felt, gestural form of abstraction has improved considerably, and by including paintings from the last three years, her current show, at the Robert Miller Gallery on 57th Street, makes the improvement especially clear. This show, her 13th since 1977, is a kind of debate all by itself.

Ms. Fishman seems to be forsaking the hulking, rather bombastic scaffoldings of recent years, represented here by works like "Blonde Ambition" and "Heart in Hand." Her new efforts feel much more painted, rather than clumsily orchestrated for effect, and she seems to tackle a different kind of brushwork each time out.

In "Fire Over the Lake," black, calligraphic strokes slither and curl across a ground of mostly red, bringing Pollock to mind. The soft, muffled blue forms in the white blizzard that is "White Clouds, Blue Mountains" have been both painted and gouged, but to surprisingly gentle effect.

And in the dark fields of "Black Lingbi" and "Mikrokosmos," a combination of slipping, dissolving grids and short, restrained strokes animate the entire surface. Not all the new work is equally good; "Stone Drum" and "Celadon" in particular reveal a penchant for paintings that are awkward and slapdash, if not unfinished. Still, this is Ms. Fishman's best show in several years.