

## Susan Rothenberg at Sperone Westwater

Human and animal fragments float like disembodied spirits in the painterly fields of Susan Rothenberg's recent canvases. These 13 paintings from 1993-94 are stronger overall and more coherent than the work in her last show at Sperone, largely because they are more concise and focused and therefore more accessible. As a former New Image painter, Rothenberg seems to be at her best when her portentous elements are reduced to their simplest terms. Here her subject matter—her inventive use of pictorial space, and her singular painting method—have become better integrated.

A good number of these works offer haunting and

evocative images that seem to emerge from a deep source, perhaps partly inspired by the artist's relocation to Galisteo, N.M. several years ago. In *Calling the Dogs*, Rothenberg arranges sketchy forms in an ascending order. A pair of burnt-red arms extends vertically (their clapping hands causing a stir of crimson in the surrounding air) toward four floating, long-snouted dog heads. A face outlined at the bottom edge of the bright yellow ground appears to be beckoning from a distant netherworld. Rothenberg maintains an air of spontaneity while conjuring up mysterious hieroglyphs that together describe some timeless ritual.

Two of the largest paintings,

*Accident #2* and *Accident #3*, are among the more elusive in terms of content. In the former a massive horse about to topple over can be seen at the top of the canvas, its neck bent down to its hooves. Scattered nearby are three human limbs like markers on a race course. Although the composition is boldly asymmetrical, the placement of these elements and their relationship to one another seems relatively arbitrary. *Accident #3* is a more intriguing work in which an elongated human leg seems to be kicking a head away from its own torso. Dismembered body parts, rendered in brick red against an activated white ground, ricochet down the painting as if inside a pinball machine. Rothenberg's fragmentation of the figure, recalling stylistic devices of Baselitz and Guston, does not quite work in this painting.

Rothenberg's rich iconography continues to grow and mutate, the horse being only one of many subjects now. Small wonder that she admires de Kooning, a fellow voyager into the psychic unknown. Like him she seems willing to chance failure in her work, showing a courage all too rare in painting today. —Robert G. Edelman

## Frank Stella at Knoedler and American Fine Arts

As his recent murals at Knoedler—one of which measured nearly 100 feet—remind us, Frank Stella has never had a problem with commandeering the space in which his work is situated. The two site-specific works titled *Loohooloo* and *Ohonoo* after Herman Melville stories, bowed out from the wall

into the gallery like severely warped canvases. In both cases, the fiberglass support formed a smooth, parabolic curve that extended around the room, distending the multifarious curved shapes and patterns aggressively fighting for space and attention on top of it. Rather than the proverbial explosion in a shingle factory, Stella's effusive murals look like a computer design program run amok.

In their response to an architectural structure, these works follow Stella's recent mural for the Princess of Wales Theater in Toronto [see *A.I.A.*, "Report from Toronto" July '94], where he contended with a variety of curved surfaces including a dome and a proscenium arch. At Knoedler the role of the shaped support was overshadowed by the mural's profusion of graphic signs, twisted grids, garish color and graffiti-like marks. The combination of these multi-layered shards of color and pattern (what Stella once called "color density") and the encroaching wall made for a disorienting spatial experience. This effect is consistent with Stella's assertion that painting deals in literal space, not just in the illusion of it. It's conceivable that Stella sees these paintings as an in-the-round summation—à la Monet's Orangerie installation—of the last 20 years of his work.

The sketches at American Fine Arts date from a 1961-62 trip to Spain, during a period when Stella was working out ideas about shaped canvases. What is most intriguing about these quick studies of overlapping rectangles, squares and triangles is how they anticipated some of the directions Stella's work took over the next decade or so. In the drawings,

Susan Rothenberg: *Calling the Dogs*, 1993-94, oil on canvas, 69 1/4 by 65 1/4 inches; at Sperone Westwater.





little is left from the concentric square format of the "Black Paintings." Instead there is an open asymmetrical arrangement of geometric elements that looks forward to Stella's irregular polygon paintings of the mid-'60s. Several works even suggest the eccentric architecture of the "Polish Village" series of the early '70s, or the metal relief "Brazilian" series of a few years later. With hindsight, we can read these drawings as revelatory of the many shifts Stella's paintings were about to make.

—Robert G. Edelman