



May Stevens' "Flag Triptych" is part of the opening exhibition which is presently on display at Pelham-Von Stoffler's new River Oaks Center gallery.

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A year and a half after its arrival in Houston, Pelham-Von Stoffler Gallery raised the curtain this week on a magnificent new gallery space in River Oaks Shopping Center, establishing itself as one of the city's major contemporary galleries.

In its opening show, one of three group shows to be held through the summer, the cool, professional atmosphere of the space nearly overwhelms the art, which doesn't project the same expertise.

The 3,000 sq. ft. space at 2000 Peden has three galleries and a centrally located storage area for browsing through painting bins. A fourth large exhibition area will soon be added, expanding the gallery to 4,000 sq. ft.

The gallery has two entrances. The main one at 2000 Peden opens from the parking lot at the corner of Peden and McDuffie, one block off West Gray. The second one opens off West Gray into a small exhibition area which will be devoted to prints and drawings.

A clever device that gallery owners Dick Pelham-Keller and Egon Von Stoffler have used in the space is visually "dropping" the 20 foot ceiling to 14 feet, 6 inches by painting a five foot border along the top of the walls to blend with the black ceiling.

The effect is one of volume with a degree of intimacy. The proportions should be perfect for large sculpture and work well with painting, too.

The opening show reflects the direction of the gallery outlined by Pelham-Keller as "protest painters, constructivists, middle-generation people in their mid-30s. Definitely not blue chip." This shotgun approach is even more diluted with a group show. None of these diverse ideas achieves much expression and some of

these works don't bear well the freedom the new space allows. It makes one yearn for some artistic certainty, blue-hued or not.

The strongest works in the show have been well-placed at the gallery's entrance. May Stevens, a veteran New York protest painter, is showing two works from her "Big Daddy" series which she's been involved with for several years. More complicated with more involved drawing than her earlier work, these Pop-ish paintings make the strongest statement in the show.

Joan Semmel's "Flesh-scapes" may well be the show's most subtle statements. Closeups of various junctures in a nude human body, the paintings with their undulating forms take on the feel of landscape.

Rudolf Baranik's paintings (his collages were seen last season at the gallery's old location) work remarkably well in the space, their moody black veiled forms balancing with the architectural features. A one-man show by this artist should be a smash in this space.

Of the three regional artists in the show, Don Shaw fares best with his assemblages in the small back gallery. Shaw's ideas and his work have deepened substantially in the past year. He appears to have moved beyond the protest stage into more complex, artistic ideas.

Robert Rector's paintings and Roberta Harris' constructions of colored globs are the most tentative and appear awkward in the space. The youngest of the artists and the least experienced in showing, their works have only fleeting confidence in execution or idea. Rector's ideas, based on a sense of geometric volume in a painting format, are solid and have exciting possibilities. His paintings will doubtless grow up to the demands of a gallery space like this one.

Harris' ideas, as I've commented before, appear thin and derivative to me. The properties of impastoed color, a limited area for exploration anyway, have been overemphasized in the past decade of experimental, environmental art. Harris doesn't appear to be saying anything unique in her work.

Subsequent group shows should have more conceptual continuity. "Perspectives: One/Two" will include work by Budd Hopkins, Randall Timmons, Ben Woitena and Don Foster. The third show will include Courbusier watercolors, Pica-bia gouaches and Herbin gouaches.