

Charlotte Moser

THE NATION

HOUSTON

Supine superrealism

The highlight of Houston's busy fall art season was the International Women's Year conference, sponsored in November by the Department of State. Some 20 exhibitions of art by national and local artists were scheduled in the city, ranging from galleries showing women artists they already represented to the "Contemporary Issues: Works on Paper by Women" exhibition organized by Los Angeles' Feminist Art Institute.

For the event, Pelham Von Stoffler Gallery brought together paintings by New York's Joan Semmel from 1974-76 that have been shown individually around the country but never as a group. It made a striking show with the subtle variations that indicate Semmel has found a format that allows constant artistic growth.

The oldest work, *Intimacy/Autonomy* (1974), presented Semmel's superrealist depiction of the nude human body lying at rest, with slight overtones of chartreuse sensationalism. By 1975, she had turned to close-ups of genre scenes with lots of flesh and nudity.

However, by 1976, Semmel's painting had dispensed with literariness, and focused instead on the weighty intimacy of body forms so close and moist that the impact is almost overwhelming. *Side View*, 1975 (shown here for the first time), and *Touch*, 1976, have an overall hypnotic effect—languid, bulky, fresh and very much alive. Though her paintings still shock, it's the shock of real intimacy and of exposure to a trembling vulnerability, awakening reserves of emotions beyond simple vision.

Also shown were works on paper by

Houston's Roberta Harris, one of the city's most promising young artists. These collages were departures for Harris who had recently been building long encrusted wall totems from thick dabs of colored mortar.

In the new works Harris held onto the lush textural properties of her wall pieces but let go of the rigid, rather contained format. These collages combine swatches of fabrics, flowery labels, lipstick kisses, squares of Color Aid and scribbles of graphite and sensual colored paints. While the ideas are still formative in these works, possibilities for further exploration are vast. What Harris appears most attracted to is an almost Hofmann-like stabilizing of chaotic monochromatic energies with riveting geometric shapes of color.

Riveting shapes of pure color have been the stock in trade for some time of Houston artist Dorothy Hood, whose new paintings were on view at Meredith Long Gallery. An artist who began her career 20 years ago in Mexico City, Hood was influenced early on by Surrealism and the dark metaphysics of the Latin mind. For the last decade, she has combined her abstract warnings of the apocalypse with a refined color sense that is growing increasingly exhilarating.

Hood's shapes and painting techniques have remained largely the same in these new paintings. Burgeoning, encrusted shapes, cracked with slivers of white paint, surround open flat areas. At times, tentacles of the oozing shapes reach out into the void which, regardless of its color, always seemed incredibly empty and airless.

In the past, dissonant hues like brilliant magentas and turquoises corresponded to these jagged shapes. The new work, however, has softened the bitter cast of Hood's colors. While the jagged shapes are still crusty with white slices, the void has a new

character. Airless though it still is, it is no longer empty but diffused with gradations of glowing colors that appease the hardness of the shapes. Washes of black paint also refer to both earlier Hood work and her current interest in watercolor.

William Stanley Hayter, at 76 one of the grand old men of contemporary art, has taken another direction as his career advances. As can be seen in the selection of Hayter's paintings and prints from 1947 to 1976 at Louisiana Gallery, he has steadily moved toward more stylized geometric patterning in both his painting and printing. While such regularity in forms allows for freer play of colors in his color viscosity etching, it restricts somewhat the spontaneous paint gestures of his earlier painting.

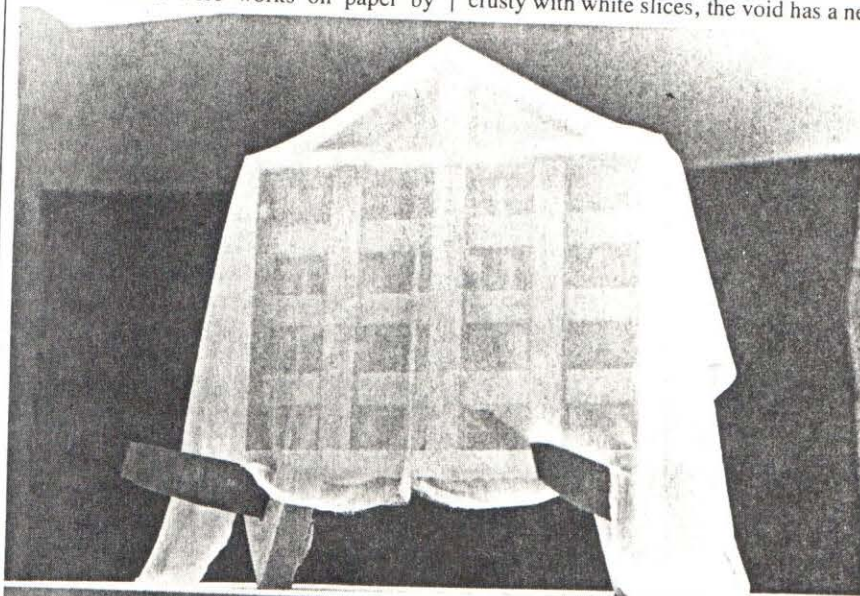
The earliest group of Hayter paintings in the show (the 1947 work stands alone in its period) comes from the years 1958-62. Infused with the excitement of Abstract Expressionism, these brilliant oil paintings are washed with colors and whirling lines, executed in a technique that beads in an effect somewhat like that in his etchings.

After 1970, however, the once whirling lines become more diagrammatic and apparently are concerned more with the impact of pure design as opposed to the poetry of freely-associating shapes. At the same time, his colors have become more garish and carnivallike—wild descriptions of the construction behind Hayter's own vision. Yet, while his paintings strive for subtleties through rigid forms, his etchings of the same period find easy subtlety through richness of color.

Arkansas artist Donald Roller Wilson is also stretching for a structure of reality, but he has turned to the vocabulary of surrealism. His show at Moody Gallery pivoted on three major works that were packed with the themes and bizarre juxtapositions that Wilson, a slow and meticulous painter, has developed over the years. All three are set in salon situations with high-backed Victorian chairs, 1950s mahogany coffee tables, animals dressed in taffeta and generally acting like humans, and humans appearing as metaphors for social satire—all set up in a forest glen.

Two of these paintings relate directly to social satire, a new development for Wilson whose earlier work could always pass for absurdist comedy. These works, however, sardonically poke at heads of state or people of authority. Now sitting in Wilson's scenes are Nixon with a unicorn horn, Queen Elizabeth with a steam iron, a college professor in a business suit and high heeled women's shoes. Symbol of television social satire Mary Kay Place of "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" is also seen.

Other new developments point to Wilson's firmer grip on his message. Smoke, a minor recurring theme in the past, has been elevated to the rank of life-giving semen



Michael Tracy, *Cenotaph I*, 1977, wood, acrylic, bronze and silk.