

Michael Hafftka's paintings, like all new art, are often disturbing and even distressing. They not only deal very directly with issues that can be difficult to face, they also diverge stylistically in many important respects from the accepted conventions of our day. One of the ways Hafftka does this is precisely to transcend the issue of style, to realize the content of his work so powerfully on the canvas that what he paints takes precedence, at least at first, over how he paints it, even though his style is as uniquely his own as any to be found in art today.

Hafftka's subjects are sometimes shocking — sexual mayhem and human excretion, for example — but it is not so much the subjects of his paintings as it is their rawness and directness that sets them apart from the work of other artists. His work is not about other art or the images produced by the mass media. His sources, rather, are in his own life and his own mind, but his explorations are so profound and his presentation of them is so strong that they take on something of the character of myth. Hafftka's paintings are not simply post-modern, they are post-Freudian and post-Holocaust as well. One can see him as a voyager in the most primitive parts of the human psyche and a narrator with no illusions about human nature.

On the left of *Bravado*, one of the works included in this exhibition, an animal with two penises has fallen to the floor beneath a large splash of red that probably indicates its own blood. To one side of *Three-Figures*, a globular red shape seems about to devour a standing man. These images, archetypal as they may seem, are not based on Hafftka's study of Freudian or Jungian psychology. Rather they come from within the artist himself, as part of a process that has been at the root of his work from the very beginning. Hafftka started to make art in 1974 while living in Israel. Almost by chance he picked up a child's crayon set and began to draw. His subjects were suggested by his dreams, of which he had many because the hot climate of Israel in summer meant that he slept lightly and dreamed a great deal. His drawings were not illustrations of his dreams, however, but were derived from them. As he put it, "I was completely overwhelmed with dreams and psychic experience." Hafftka began to draw constantly, almost obsessively, and he describes himself as "compelled to make these images . . . I was completely driven."¹ For him at this moment his dreams were somehow real, and his drawings seemed to him to be not idle reporting of vaporous fancies but a necessary bringing forth of real experience onto the paper, an attitude that has continued throughout his work up to the present.

It was during this period of intensive drawing that Hafftka decided to study art, not in the usual manner by attending art school but by studying in museums and libraries. Initially he turned to Picasso, spending two weeks with Christian Zervos' multi-volume catalogue of his works. Hafftka found himself especially drawn to Picasso's early expressionistic paintings at the time of *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and to his late etchings, which were also expressionist in character. Later he was fascinated for a while by Marcel Duchamp, an interest he now regards as inexplicable, but the two greatest influences on his early work were Paul Klee and Jean Dubuffet. Today Hafftka sees their role in his development primarily as encouraging his explorations of various materials and methods of making images, but there is nevertheless some degree of indebtedness in his

early paintings and drawings to the work of both artists, especially to Dubuffet.

In Israel Hafftkka devoted himself to making drawings and painted very little, but he began to paint regularly after his return to this country in the summer of 1975. He lived then in the Bronx, where he was brought up, and continued to do so after he married his wife Yonat, who soon joined him from Israel. For short periods beginning in 1977 he was able to paint full-time, but for the most part he was forced to work at a variety of jobs. At first Hafftkka's paintings were relatively small, but by 1979 they had reached the 78 by 62 inch size he most often uses today. At the same time Hafftkka's work was growing in size his output was also increasing, going from one to three and finally to four paintings a week at some periods. As he has always been almost fanatically concerned about the quality and permanence of his materials, his expenses at this time were very high, and not surprisingly, Hafftkka became anxious to find a market for his work. Although he did exhibit paintings and drawings in group shows at small galleries and had an edition of his prints and a book on his drawings published, the heavy expenses of his art drove him to desperate attempts to derive an income from his work. Believing that slides and transparencies were inadequate representations of his paintings, on two occasions, despite his utter lack of financial resources, he rented a truck to carry them to New York art dealers but met not only rejection but sometimes hostility as well. One prominent dealer looked at his work, turned pale, sat for five minutes, and told him it was impossible to show his work because it was "too horrifying." Hafftkka describes himself at this period as "furious" and "enraged," and he characterizes his experience as "a nightmare."² It prompted him to a bitter, intemperate critique of the art world and its values, *Art of Experience, Experience of Art*, which was published in 1982.

It was, however, precisely during this time of rage and frustration and pressure from the enormous expenses his large output entailed that Hafftkka's work reached maturity. Paradoxically, as his anxiety mounted, his style became freer and more fluid at the same time as the world he depicted became more

agitated. Before about 1979 to 1981 Hafftkka's figures had been presented stiffly and hieratically. His canvases had tended to be filled with a variety of all-over motifs, and his stylistic affinities had clearly been with Dubuffet (in the paintings), Picasso (especially in his drawings), and several varieties of primitive art. From 1979 to 1981 Hafftkka's visual world changed rapidly. His backgrounds became simpler and more abstract, and he began to concentrate on human and animal figures instead, building them out of strokes of paint rather than first drawing their outlines and then filling them in. At the same time the figures became more realistic and more fully modeled but with portions of their bodies — eyes, teeth, hands, genitals — exaggerated in form and intensified in color, and the paint itself took on a new energy and mobility as well as a heightened expressiveness.

These developments have continued down to the present. The backgrounds in Hafftkka's paintings have tended to become even more abstract and sometimes to disappear altogether, while his figures are increasingly composed of liquid strokes of brightly colored paint. At times the paint seems to take on a life of its own, dissolving at one point the bodies it forms at other points, and occasionally appearing as pure marking or splatters of thrown paint. Recently the artist has painted his figures against a black ground, which itself seems to be activated in a negative sense, almost eating away at the figures in it. In this respect they are like an equivalent in two-dimensions to the sculptures of Giacometti, which seem to be dissolved by the space around them. More or less constantly Hafftkka's evolution has been toward psychological intensity and visual drama — bright, pure colors and black — materializing in bravura applications of paint.

At the same time as he was developing a highly emotional, painterly style, Hafftkka was rapidly assimilating a number of artistic influences and broadening the world he depicted. From 1979 through 1981 his work was perhaps closest to Matisse's around 1910, with similarly abtacted spaces painted in a single color combined with simplified, almost drawn figures, and occasional highly decorative patterns. But the emotional tone of

Hafftka's work was always very different from that of Matisse — *luxe, calme et volupté* being almost unimaginable in his world, which was instead tightly gripped in anxiety. In fact, the distressed figures in Hafftka's paintings caused some of his friends to see in them a resemblance to those of Francis Bacon, whose work the artist subsequently studied, from books for the most part, as little of Bacon's work was on view in New York museums. Hafftka adopted from Bacon exactly what Bacon himself had developed from the example of Matisse: highly abstract, hard-edged backgrounds in sharply contrasting colors. Almost immediately, however, Hafftka carried this development even further. In *Hold On*, for example, painted in 1983, little except the color of the Matisse-Bacon background remains, because in formal terms Hafftka has gone past Bacon's surrealism to an abstraction that evokes Richard Diebenkorn. Hafftka's figures, like Bacon's, are sometimes powerfully distorted, but he tends to see the human body very differently. Where Bacon analyzes the figure in the manner of Matisse's sculpture and Cubism, Hafftka sees it in unmediated visual terms. His distressed figures have not so much been broken down into separate shapes and planes as they have been flayed, with their muscles clearly visible where their skin has been removed. Hafftka's bodies are at once less fanciful and intellectual and more visionary. They float forward toward the picture plane like disintegrating ghosts with the interior of their bodies revealed.

It is important to realize, however, that Hafftka's people are not monsters. Often he paints himself, his wife, and their friends, and although he is conscious of the distortions in their rendering he insists that his paintings reflect the reality of his (and our) inner world. For him they are about "feelings that are in us all the time. . . . They happen in a world of their own but one that is extraordinarily closely connected to our world."³ The artist described the two figures in *Hold On*, for example, as being like two men in the middle of the Atlantic whose ship has sunk and who are holding on to a log that will obviously not be sufficient to keep them afloat.⁴ These men do, in fact, have faces that are half-simian, but they are at the same time human enough for us to feel their

predicament. Hafftka sees his work as "having to do with life . . . with our experience as human beings."⁵ The isolated men in *Hold On* are like figures from a play by Samuel Beckett. Their faces speak tragedy, and their eyes have seen horrors; their experience is real and we share it with them.

The world Hafftka paints is like Beckett's in being bleak, and the psychological reality he presents is tough and unpleasant. In *Forest* a man is being eaten by an animal as he flings away a baby, presumably to injury or death. In *Urban Piss* the visual focus of the painting is on human excretion. Curiously both works repeat familiar motifs from the history of art. The oddly posed central figure in *Urban Piss* is taken from the posture of Christ being lowered from the cross in numerous paintings of the Deposition, and the cartwheeling baby in *Forest* is a development of a motif Hafftka used a few months before in *Here* in which a baby was being held by its heel in a pose quoted from Raphael's *Massacre of the Innocents* and *Judgement of Solomon*. That Hafftka chose to paint his figures in postures unconsciously derived from Raphael and Rubens emphasizes that they are not reportage but the products of the artist's sensibility. Asked about the explicit sadomasochistic sexuality of *Bravado* he was quick to insist that he had "nothing to do with relationships like that. It was more to do with the fact that relations like that are possible."⁶

There is ample precedent in art history for work like Hafftka's. Probably the most direct parallel is to be found in the paintings of Caravaggio. There, too, as in his depiction of the beheading of St. John the Baptist with blood spurting in a stream from his neck, we find graphic, explicit violence, and there is sexuality at least equally perverse in his series of paintings of an adolescent St. John suggestively embracing a ram. Hafftka shares with Caravaggio as well an oddly determined objectivity, as if he were looking at the brutality and horror he paints without essential connection to it. There is at times in both a sense of the events they depict taking place in the half-light of a world that is only partly connected emotionally with our own, as if the primacy of the purely visual rendered human communication problematical. This resemblance is especially close in Caravaggio's late work and Hafftka's recent paintings

on black grounds. Stylistically they have in common summary, even hasty execution and human actors whose faces and flesh are reduced to a series of flickering visual signs. One suspects, too, that there is in both a kind of furious nihilism and an ability to gaze without flinching at death.

Comparison of the work of an artist who at thirty is still young and little known to some of the most profoundly disturbing pictures ever painted is hyperbole. One hopes, however, that it is suggestive of some of the qualities in Hafftká's work without necessarily asserting an equivalent achievement. This exhibition is, in any case, only a brief progress report on a rapidly changing and developing artist, and perhaps it is enough to say that his work is powerful, original, and superbly painted.

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¹ Interview with the artist, September 1984.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Interview with the artist, January 1984.

⁵ Interview with the artist, September 1984.

⁶ Ibid.