

**Jan Van Der Marck, *George Segal*. New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1976. 233 pp., illus., \$37.50**

**Sandra Shaul**

Volume 5, Number 2, 1978–1979

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077025ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077025ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Shaul, S. (1978). Review of [Jan Van Der Marck, *George Segal*. New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1976. 233 pp., illus., \$37.50]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 5(2), 140–141. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077025ar>

ment against high-priced, limited-edition prints, the 1936 exhibition attempted to reach the largest possible public with high-quality images of Depression-era America.

Various stylistic approaches are included: stolid realism, abstraction, Surrealism, and Synthetic Cubism. Powerful linoleum and woodcut scenes are contrasted to works featuring Whistlerian subtleties of grey. Outright political caricature, like Aline Fruhauf's satirical group portrait of the Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court, is juxtaposed to the more generalized humour of Paul Cadmus's rowdy sailors on *Shore Leave*. While the imagery in a few of the prints now seems overly sentimental, most of the works of art retain much of their original power.

This inexpensive volume is invaluable for its reproductions of difficult-to-obtain prints by both well-known and relatively unknown artists. The reproductions are of good quality and, since they are printed on only one side of a page, they may be removed and mounted separately. However, sometimes the illustrations are too small to fill the page adequately, as in the case of Max Weber's *Pensioned* (4 1/4" x 1 7/8"), which seems lost amid the white expanse of a page almost five times its size.

My major quarrel with Da Capo Press is that they neglected to provide a few features which would have made it easier to see the prints in their social and artistic contexts. While including a list of illustrations, this book contains no index or bibliography, both of which would have added greatly to its utility. Also, since so many of the artists represented are relatively unknown today (e.g. Riva Helfond, Charles Surendorf), it would have been helpful to have included capsule biographies. More important, there could have been a brief foreword by a specialist in the history of prints, or American art of the 1930s, explaining the history and purpose of the American Artists' Congress, and examining both the original introduction and the works of art themselves in the light

of the renaissance in U.S. printmaking that has continued, and grown, since that time.

NANCY HELLER  
University of Texas  
Commerce

---

JAN VAN DER MARCK *George Segal*.  
New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1976.  
233 pp., illus., \$37.50.

It is peculiar that although no one would dispute the necessity of including the work of George Segal in a discussion of art in the 'sixties, such work has always fallen victim to hasty definitions based on dubious derivations or on proud declarations of what it is not. Finally, fifteen years after the first plaster casts were exhibited at the Green Gallery in 1962, Jan van der Marck has presented the first serious and comprehensive study of this artist. Classifying previous commentaries on Segal, which at various times related him to such diverse artistic movements as Abstract Expressionism, Dadaism, Pop Art, and Happenings, Van der Marck attempts to correct and clarify the accounts of Segal's intentions and actions in order to free him from an art-historical limbo.

By covering a period from 1961 to 1972, it is possible to document Segal's development from his paintings, which revert to a figurative style as Abstract Expressionism wanes, to the discovery of the technique of using bandages soaked in plaster which allowed him to create three-dimensional casts, and finally to the creation of his sculptural environments.

The book contends that the most common misinterpretations of Segal's sculpture concern its relationship to painting and to real-life situations. A superficial criticism of his work misreads a manufactured element into his use of plaster casts of real people, thus equating him with Pop Art. In similar fashion, his use of real trucks, restaurant equipment (Fig. 1) and other objects in the environmental settings of his work gives rise to associations

with Happenings. However, what many critics fail to see is that far from being simply carbon copies of human forms, the plaster figures are reworked after the casting to emphasize and suppress certain features in accord with the artist's preconceived notion of the piece. The handling of the plaster surface relies heavily upon Abstract Expressionism, and its placement within the highly structured framework of a designated environment allies the work closely to the historical tradition of Cubism, Constructivism, and Neo-Plasticism. Emphasis is placed by the author upon the failure of critics to conceive of the figures and their surroundings as single entities. Critics also forget that Segal's career began in painting, and that he has not discarded the influences of Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, Mondrian, and Hofmann.

Van der Marck's sympathies lie with Michael Fried, who has interpreted Segal's sculpture along the theoretical lines of the Minimalists. Expanding upon Fried's analysis, Van der Marck discusses the theatrical quality of the sculpture, and the 'distancing effect' (a term coined by Fried) created between the object of art and the spectator. This final point reminds us that Segal's sculpture can only be viewed from an external point; the observer is not welcome into the rooms or spaces that define the boundaries, and the viewer's role is thus passive as with a traditional piece of art.

To substantiate his arguments, the author proceeds to discuss sev-

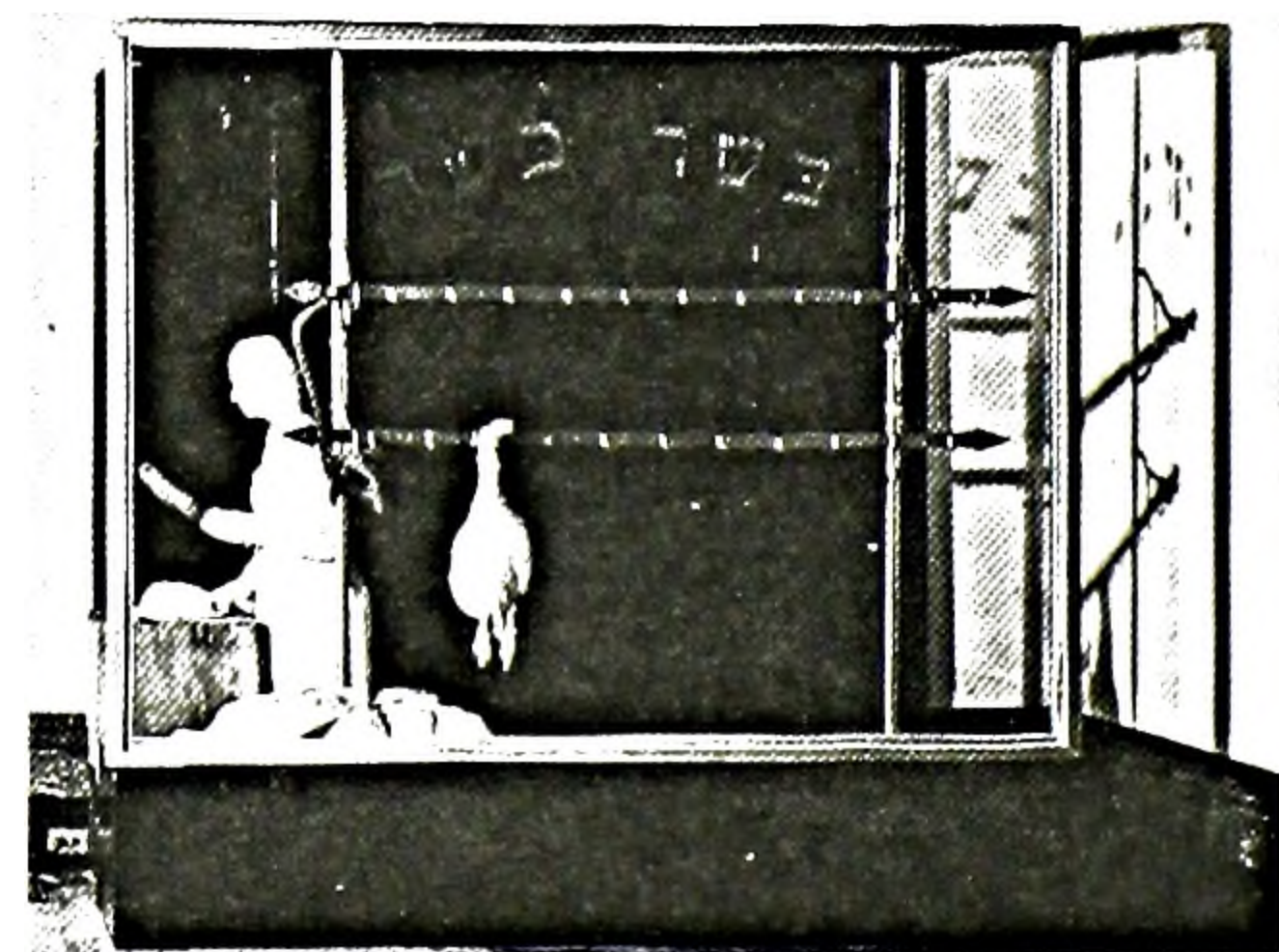


FIGURE 1. Segal, *The Butcher Shop*. From Van der Marck.

eral key works beyond those mentioned in his general analysis, in order to relate their histories on both the physical and philosophical levels, and to demonstrate their attributes and failings. Ultimately, Van der Marck convincingly illustrates that Segal is above all a formalist, via the painting tradition of Mondrian to Hofmann, and the sculptural theory of the Minimalists.

To complete this extremely readable and scholarly text, a detailed biography, a listing of exhibitions, and a selected bibliography are included. Although this study was long overdue, the wait has been well worthwhile. As we approach the 'eighties, the 'sixties – with their apparent flood of innovative artistic directions – must undoubtedly be re-evaluated. In this regard, Jan van der Marck can be credited with having taken one of the first serious initiatives.

SANDRA SHAUL  
York University  
Toronto

---

KENWORTH MOFFETT *Kenneth Noland*. New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1977. 240 pp., illus., \$52.00.

*Kenneth Noland*, the forty-sixth in Abrams's series of books on contemporary artists, is in many ways one of their best. The artist concerned is of much greater artistic and historical importance than many others in the series – Christo, Jenkins, Rivers, and Samaras, for instance – and the text, running to almost 35,000 words, is much more thorough than has sometimes been the case.

The author, Kenworth Moffett, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, belongs to the same 'modernist' tradition as does his subject. Moffett's art history is deeply rooted in art criticism, and he is acutely aware of the work of art as a pattern of resolved stresses.

The opening chapter traces Noland's development up to 1958,

when he began his mature work. Noland's experience at Black Mountain College, starting in 1946, was clearly crucial. His training there, under Albers and Bolotowski, was in abstract art from the first. Like the mature Noland, both teachers worked with a 'conflict between the motility of color and the rigidities of geometric design,' and both were less ideological than such founders of abstraction as Kandinsky and Mondrian. At Black Mountain, Noland also became interested in Klee as a more expressive and spontaneous alternative to geometric art and he met Clement Greenberg, who encouraged an interest in Jackson Pollock rather than in the more fashionable De Kooning.

Moffett's second chapter is devoted to the development of the 'pure color picture' since Impressionism. He takes it that 'the flattened and often contradictory space of the modern abstract picture demands . . . simplification.' Since the most purely 'optical' property of painting is colour, the development of modernist painting can easily be explained as a 'drive toward color.' Furthermore, 'flatness and alloverness . . . have . . . been as if hidden objectives in the development of modernist painting.' It might be thought that Moffett is assuming that 'alloverness or at least its effects' are not just 'imperatives of abstract painting' but also artistic values. I do not believe that such a charge would be at all correct, but it is surely a measure of the degree to which Moffett has narrowed Clement Greenberg's concept of modernist painting that his emphasis should rest quite so much on apparent historical inevitability and on artistic problem-solving.

The third chapter is an interesting revision of Noland's public image. Rather than a calculated and ascetic artist, Noland is presented as one who was stimulated by Pollock's unconventional materials and paint handling to reject all preconceptions about how paintings are to be made and who would therefore 'follow up the lead the *materials*

presented,' as he did in 'jam painting' with Morris Louis, the two of them working on the same canvas. Indeed, his whole procedure is based on challenging his own taste, temporarily suspending it during the making of the work. He is remarkably free, too, to crop his pictures, turn them upside down, not treating them at all preciously. Preliminary sketches are rare; his use of staining inhibits reworking, and he continually forces himself to improvise and invent. This emphasis on Noland's spontaneity is a welcome antidote to simplistic deductions from the mere fact of 'hard-edged' painting that such work must be limited, but I think it would be wrong to conclude that Noland's lesser work never seems protected or constrained.

Having laid this groundwork, Moffett then analyzes Noland's great mature work of 1958 to 1970, the targets, chevrons (Fig. 1), horizontal-band pictures, and diamonds. In doing so, he traces over some familiar ground: Noland's preference for 'self-cancelling' structures outside the realm of traditional composition, the particular ability of stained painting to simultaneously open up the picture plane and assert the surface, the resulting tension between the literal and the ethereal, and the various relations between the elements and the perimeter with which Noland has been so

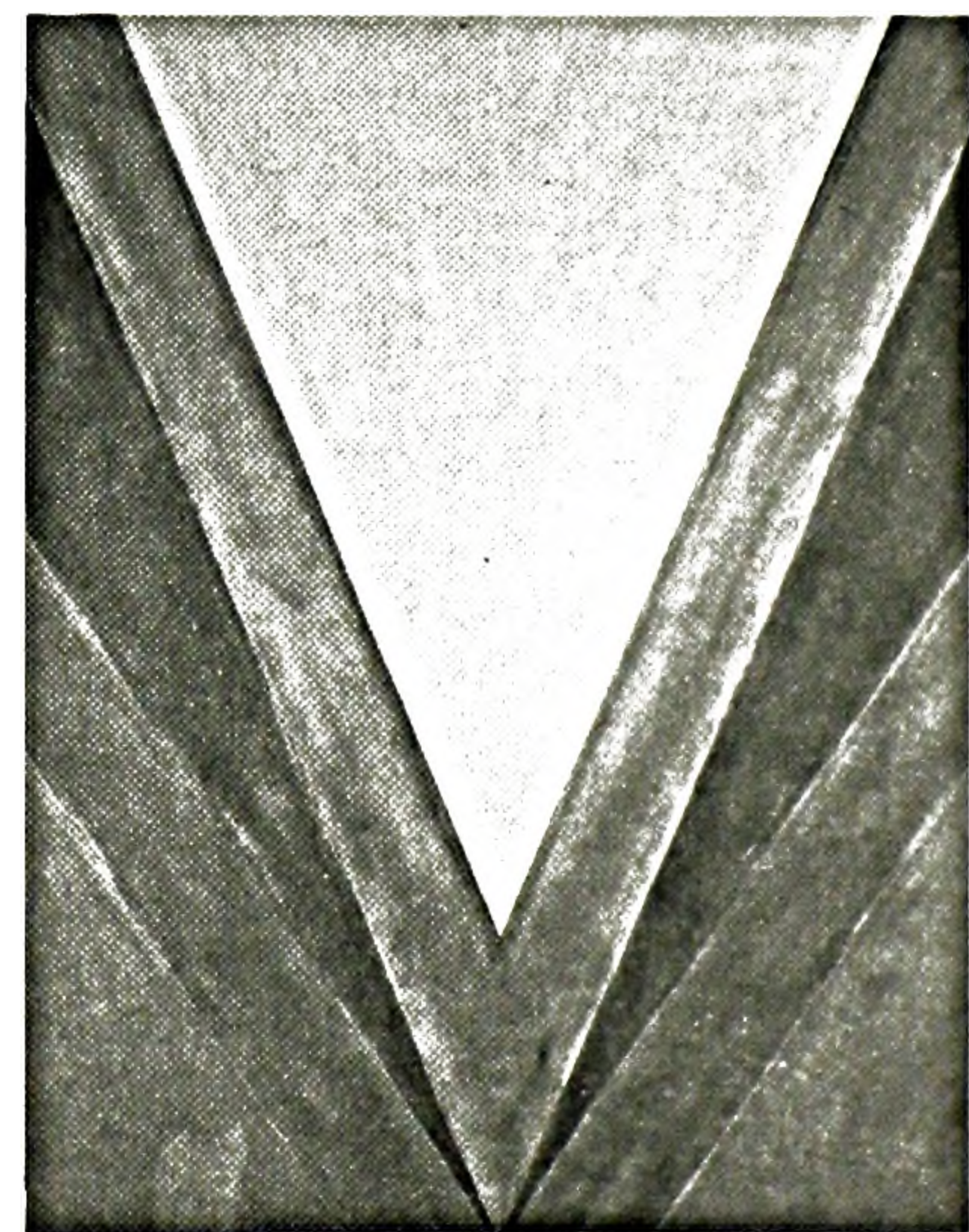


FIGURE 1. Noland, *Dusk*. From Moffett.