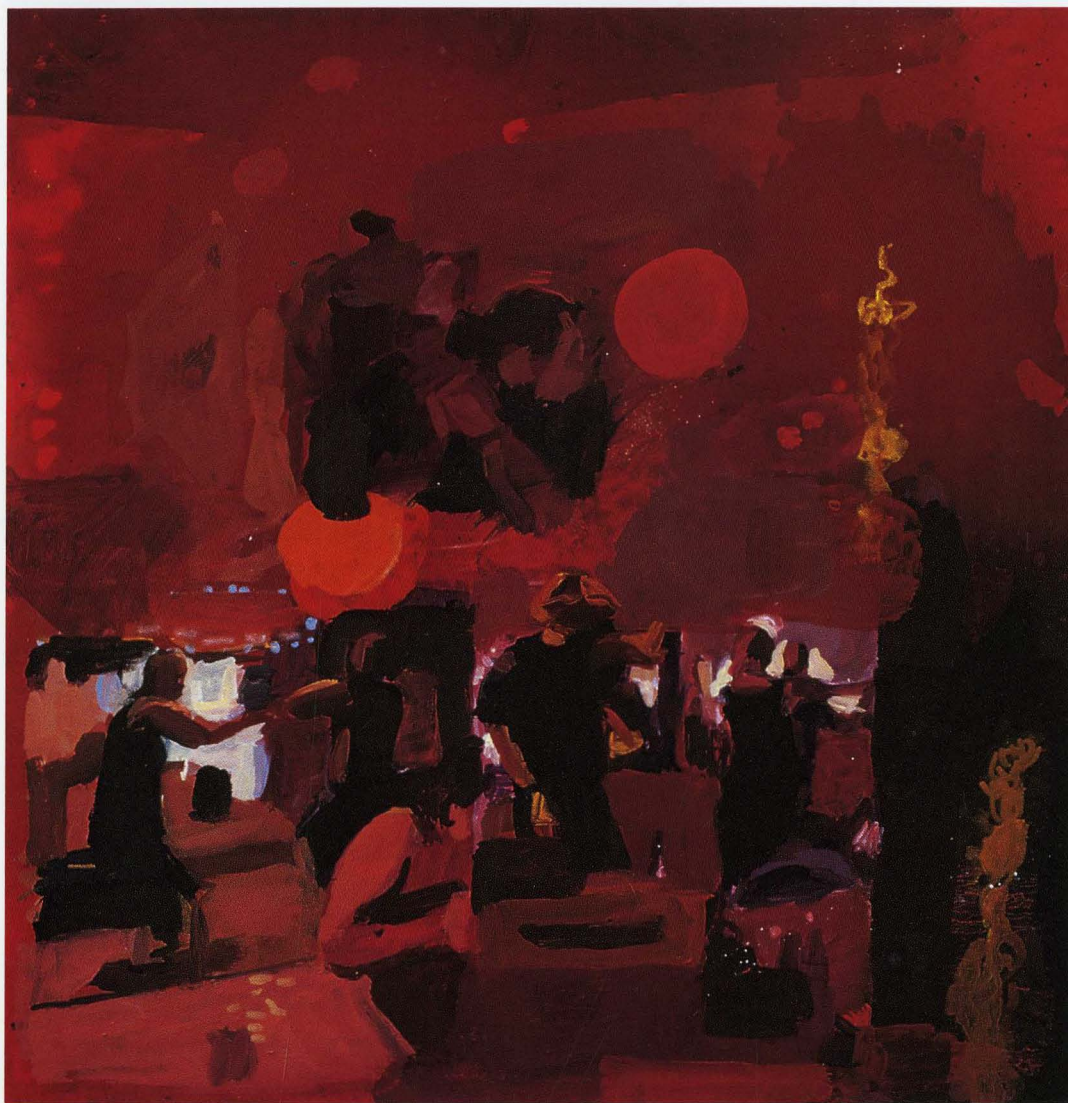


# Diane Hoffman

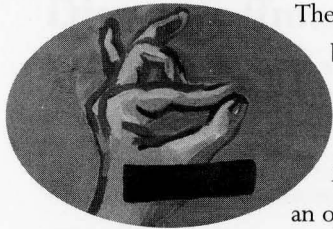
Paintings 1992–1995

February 27–March 23, 1995

Rhodes College, Clough-Hanson Gallery



*Uncouple*, 1994, oil on panel



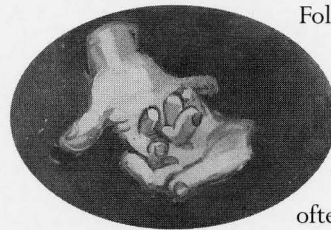
The diverse yet coherent body of work presented in *Diane Hoffman: Paintings, 1992-1995*, provides an opportunity to assess

the results of her recent exploration of painting as a communicative art. Largely unified through the issue of gesture—both bodily and painterly—her series of images constitute a logical, though not necessarily predictable, progression over the past three years. That these series also take up several crucial themes in recent painting, such as the question of gender parity within representation, the relationship with renaissance naturalism, and the pull between painting as a form of making and matching, indicates the ambitious goals she has set for herself.

Among the earliest works in the exhibition are examples from the “media sources” series, including panels from the *Riot Series* (1992). Culled from photographs in newspapers such as the *New York Times*, which she examined every day for a summer, and from magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*, these paintings treat the issue of male body gesture within pictorial convention. Finding that men often appear heroic, active, and standing in much western art, whereas women are just as likely to appear passive and supine, Hoffman commenced a search of media sources for reclining men. Over the course of eighteen months she clipped photographs and filed them in a scrapbook according to category of pose. Men asleep, knocked down, murdered, or otherwise rendered passive constitute the contemporary lexicon of recumbent masculinity. When filtered

through her painterly sensibility, these sources take on the patina of art, though not without retaining some of their disturbing connotations. As much as one wants to admire the formal coherence of each painting—the placement of solids, the harmony of colors, the veil of light—one is also reminded of the subject matter, which will not succumb to its recontextualization. A disquieting undertone of ambiguous behavior animates these paintings, their meaning almost impossible to pin down.

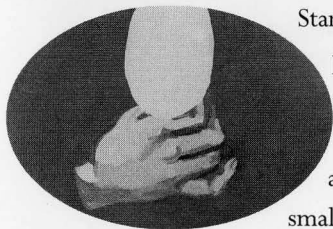
In the spring of 1993 she began her “domestic men” series, a group of paintings in which mundane activities such as dressing, cooking and sleeping were recorded on small panels. Again utilizing the power of photography to capture accurately the fleeting, yet telling quality of individual body language, she shot a number of polaroid images, which in turn served as the basis for the paintings. When joined with the previous series, as they were for her thesis exhibition at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in March 1993, these images provide an extended essay on the representation of men.



Following her graduation, Hoffman returned to the roots of renaissance narrative painting, which had often provided her with a frame of reference for her examination of the language of bodily communication. Late in the spring of 1993, she reviewed the cycle of frescoes by Giotto at the Arena Chapel in Padua illustrating the Life of the Virgin and the Life of Christ. Noting the emphasis on hands, facial expression, and posture to convey the meaning of the

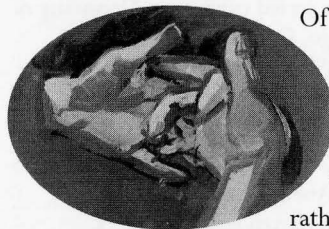
narrative, she made a list of each type of motion found within the fresco, how often it appeared, and whether it was associated with men or women. With this conceptual base, she then listed current bodily gestures that related to those found in Giotto's work in her search for a correlation between renaissance and contemporary communication. Each painting is organized around a one-syllable verb—hang, grasp, crack, etc.—that she staged using friends as models. The central motif of each is a quotidian action performed by a figure, sometimes with a companion, sometimes not.

At once carefully realized, the series, like that of the “domestic men,” is also an essay in painterly construction. The sometimes drab tones of the work of the preceding year have given way to a richer palette somewhat reminiscent of the work of the painters active in the San Francisco bay area, such as Elmer Bischoff, whose work Hoffman admires. Similar too is the attention to seemingly insignificant, yet telling, detail, such as the slouch of a shoulder, or the arrangement of furniture within an apartment. Yet each detail quickly gives way to its visual equivalent, the slouch performing as a line, the chairs and sofas as blocks of color and shape. One is encouraged to move between readings of these paintings as documents of bodily language and variations in formal arrangement, with the understanding that both are of equal importance.



Standing in between the previous series and the one that now occupies Hoffman's attention is a group of about forty small paintings given the

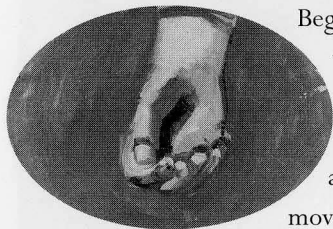
title *Hand Job* (1994), for obvious reasons. Initially inspired by the art historian Moshe Barasch's study, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (1987), the paintings contain one or two hands, appropriated or just inspired by the fresco cycles at the Arena and Peruzzi Chapels, as well as that at the Church of St. Francis at Assisi.<sup>1</sup> As Barasch notes, each gesture was originally meant to convey a specific meaning, many of which were codified by the ancient rhetorician Quintilian in his *Institutio oratoria*.<sup>2</sup> Yet when lifted out of context by Hoffman and framed in so many paintings arranged on one wall, the gestures are divorced from their signifying function. Communication breaks down. In this reshuffling it is not clear whose gesture is witnessed, Joachim's, Christ's, Mary's or perhaps Giotto's or even Hoffman's. When truncated from the rest of the body, the hands become synecdoches, but for what remains the telling question. The meaning of this hand game is suddenly ambiguous. Is it an act of appropriation, or a play of shadows cast on a wall? If the latter, might this not invoke the ancient myth about the origins of mimetic art in the outlining of shadows cast upon a wall, and the naive belief in painting as a form of transparent communication? Perhaps.



Of course the paintings are not fully transparent, their meaning not transcendent, but rather they are opaque, material, immediate, mediated. One is always brought back to the surface of these images, which are labored, meaning reworked. As such they



engage in an ongoing dialogue in post-World War Two art about figurative painting as both autonomous and mimetic, the distinction being similar to that drawn between making and matching by E. H. Gombrich.<sup>3</sup> Like so much modernist painting, hers actively acknowledges its own construction, crafted by a hand both steady and uncertain, purposeful and hesitant, calculating and unsure. For Hoffman, the process of production is as important as the subject matter, which after all is about her hand.

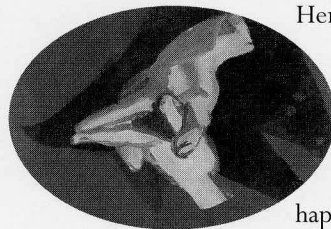


Beginning this past fall with a series of quick studies of friends dancing, socializing and performing, she moved into the final

series of paintings included in this exhibition, the “interference” series. Again taking numerous photographs provided her with suggestive imagery that captured the ephemeral body language of individuals moving to the music of Prince or Big Ass Truck, posing for a departmental portrait, or trying to eat their dinner. Thematically, the series is organized around the social life of Memphis, and as such connects with other moments in the ongoing modernist infatuation with the spectacle of popular culture. One thinks of London in the 1960s, or of Paris in the Second Empire, which is not to confuse Beale Street with Carnaby Street, or the dance club Six One Six with the Moulin de la Galette, but only to suggest a continuum of experience within the modern period. Like the painters who recorded swinging London or the Paris transformed by Baron Haussmann, Hoffman too is sensitive to the way painting can

*paintings from the series Hand Job, 1994, oil on canvas*

both record and give shape to the experience of modernity. It is an experience constantly slipping away, forever changing, mutating from one event into the next, as fleeting and fickle as the whims of fashion, registered in the latest dance step, or in the way musicians dress and hold their instruments.



Here again the issue of painting’s mimetic function is raised if only to be negated. As sometimes happens in the previous

series, abstract shapes are placed over the recognizable vignettes of human activity. Hoffman deliberately covered her paintings with randomly arranged forms, layers of floral motifs, or pools of soaked color. The strategy is a modernist one, returning attention to the surface of the panel. In some works the shapes, or “interference,” echo and mimic the direction of the gesture around them, suggesting a bridge between various parts of the composition, as in *Deadlock* (1994). In others the relationship is more purely random, for instance in several of the paintings of the band Big Ass Truck. Often the “interference” destabilizes one’s perception of the visual field, rendering ambiguous the relationship between surface and depth, while also obfuscating the language of the body. In both instances this frustrates one’s desire for closure and thereby prolongs the time of interaction between beholder and image. Always the shapes serve as a reminder that painting is a more complex enterprise than is usually acknowledged.

The paintings gathered in this exhibition constitute neither a beginning nor an end. They



*Riot Series*, 1992, oil on panel

are part of a process of exploring the language of visual communication. If one takes the time, using these paintings as a guide, one will find that this is a language well worth learning, and that Diane Hoffman is a consummate guide, rigorous in her exploration of her materials, open-minded in her willingness to engage in this dialogue.

David McCarthy, Chair  
Department of Art, Rhodes College

#### Notes

1. Moshe Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
2. *Ibid*, 16.
3. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 93-115.

# Diane Hoffman

## Education

- 1993 Master of Fine Arts, Painting, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- 1987 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI
- 1986 European Honors Program, Rhode Island School of Design, Palazzo Cenci, Rome, Italy

## Teaching Experience

- 1994- Assistant Professor of Art, Rhodes College, Memphis, TN
- 1994 Spring, Early College Program Instructor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Continuing Studies Program
- 1992 Fall Semester Teaching Assistantship, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

## Selected Exhibitions

- 1994 Chicago Critics Choose Chicago Artists, Zolla Lieberman Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1993 In Between Representation, Gallery 2, Chicago, IL
- Contemporary Art Workshop, one person exhibition, Chicago, IL
- RISD Alumni Exhibition, 12x12, juried exhibition, Woods Gerry Gallery, Providence, RI
- MFA Exhibition, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- The Ninth Annual All-Illinois Graduate Art Exhibition, juried exhibition, Northwestern University, Chicago, IL
- MFA Exhibition, juried exhibition, University of Illinois at Chicago, Gallery 400, Chicago, IL
- 1992 Tondo, Max Fish, New York, NY
- RISD Alumni Exhibition, 12x12, juried exhibition, Woods Gerry Gallery, Providence, RI
- 1991 Bakehouse 2nd Annual Members Exhibition, juried exhibition, Bakehouse, Miami, FL
- Exhibition, Vermont Studio Colony, Red Mill Gallery, Johnson, VT

- 1990 52nd Annual National Exhibition of Contemporary American Paintings, juried exhibition, The Society of the Four Arts, Palm Beach, FL
- Salon des Refusés, juried exhibition, Broward Art Guild, Ft. Lauderdale, FL
- RISD Alumni Exhibition, 12x12, juried exhibition, Woods Gerry Gallery, Providence, RI
- The Way of the Woman Artist, juried exhibition, Women's Caucus of Art, Hollywood Art and Culture Center, Hollywood, FL
- 1989 Celebrate Florida, juried exhibition, Women's Caucus of Art, Miami Dade Community College, Miami, FL
- The Female Face and Form, juried exhibition, Carefully Chosen Gallery, Miami Beach, FL
- 1988 50th Annual National Exhibition of Contemporary American Paintings, juried exhibition, The Society of the Four Arts, Palm Beach, FL
- 1987 European Honors Program Exhibition, Bayard Ewing Gallery, Providence, RI
- 1986 Mostra Degli Album Degli Schizzi Exhibition, Piazza Cenci Gallery, Rome, Italy

## Honors and Competitions

- 1992 Fall Semester Teaching Assistantship, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago
- SAIC Trustee Scholarship, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago
- 1991 Vermont Studio Colony resident scholarship, January and February
- 1990 Salon des Refusés, Best in Show, Broward Art Guild
- 1987 Joseph Lefreve Memorial, Award for Excellence, Rhode Island School of Design