

Ron Davis, *Six-Ninths Red* (36), 1966, polyester resin and fiberglass, 72 x 131 1/4".

RON DAVIS: BEYOND FLATNESS

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The image of Ron Davis that emerges from the dense tangle of '60s criticism of his work is that of a wily theoretician of modernism. In the commentary of Michael Fried and Barbara Rose, for example, Davis is made to seem an unequivocal, single-minded formalist obsessed above all not with the sensuous colors or the illusionist geometric shapes he was actually creating, but with cleverly using those forms in order to affirm the artifice of "surface." Last year, in this magazine, Davis' work of the '60s was strongly attacked as "implicitly conservative," while his newer paintings, a group of which were then on exhibition at Castelli, were seen as "explicitly conservative." It is interesting to note that both the earlier praise and the recent censure were based primarily on antithetical readings of Davis' treatment of space, but that both took as their basic assumption the unacceptability of illusionist space in a modernist painting. Though the imperatives of Greenbergian criticism may have lost the panache they once had, the principle of necessary flatness seems to linger on. Henry James once said, "No theory is kind to us that cheats us of seeing."

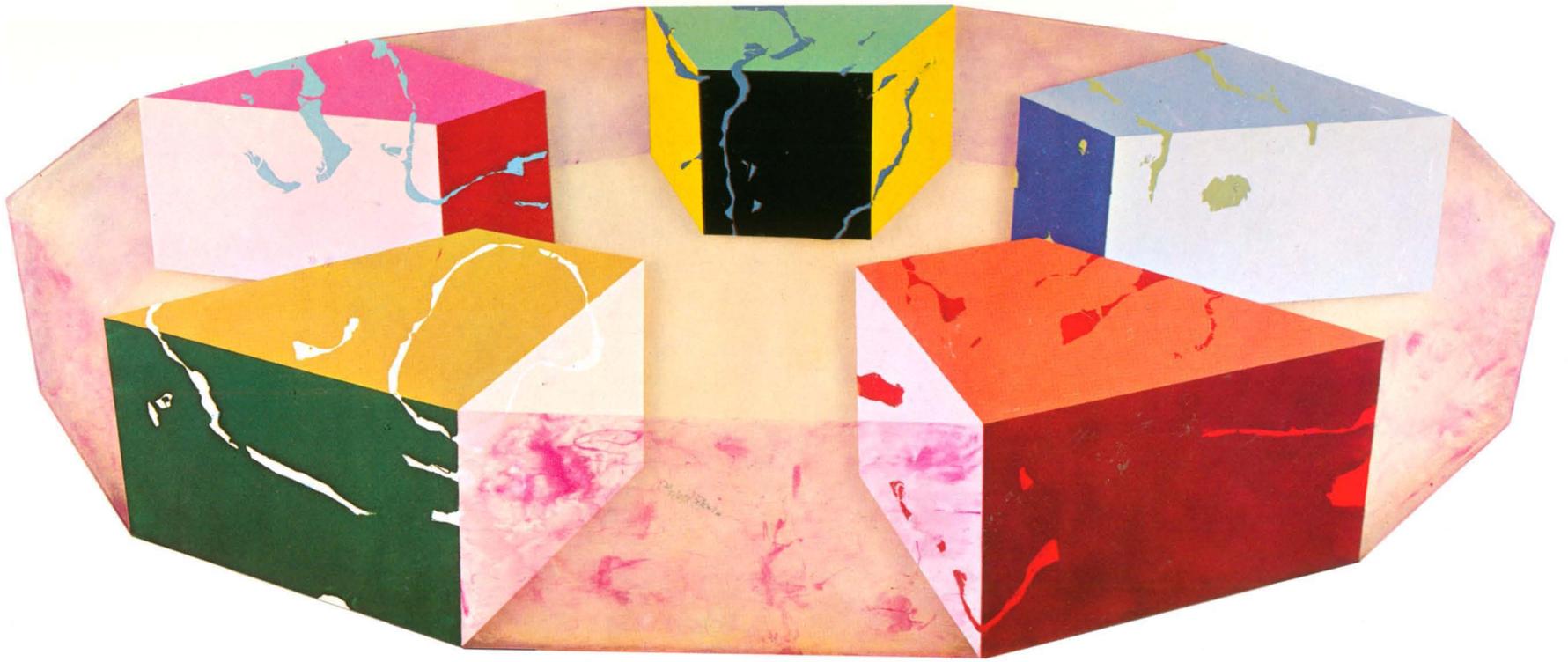
A small but tasty Ron Davis retrospective organized by George Neubert at the Oakland Museum this summer provides the first opportunity to see different phases of this important West Coast artist's style as part of an ongoing related *oeuvre*, as well as an occasion to trace the extraordinary trajectory of his career. Santa Monica-born and a lifelong California resident, Davis has sometimes been con-

sidered a typical product of the Los Angeles synthetic esthetic. His *succès fou* career, however, has been anything but typical for California artists, and began even before the development of his characteristic polyester resin and fiberglass technique. Davis did not start art school until he was 23 (he attended the San Francisco Art Institute from 1960 to 1964), but nevertheless he immediately seemed to be one of those whom Rilke had called the *Frühe Geglückte*—those "early successes, Creation's pampered darlings," to whom fate would be maternal and life (or at least art) a series of lucky breaks. By 1964, his last year as a student, he had already participated in 10 group shows, had sold a painting to the collector Robert Rowan for \$600, and had, the year before, won first place in the Richmond Art Center Annual. The prize-winning painting, *Roll Your Own*, was reproduced in *Artforum* (then being published in San Francisco) and endorsed by the magazine as "magnificent . . . as good as the best optical illusion hard-edge painting being done in this country today."

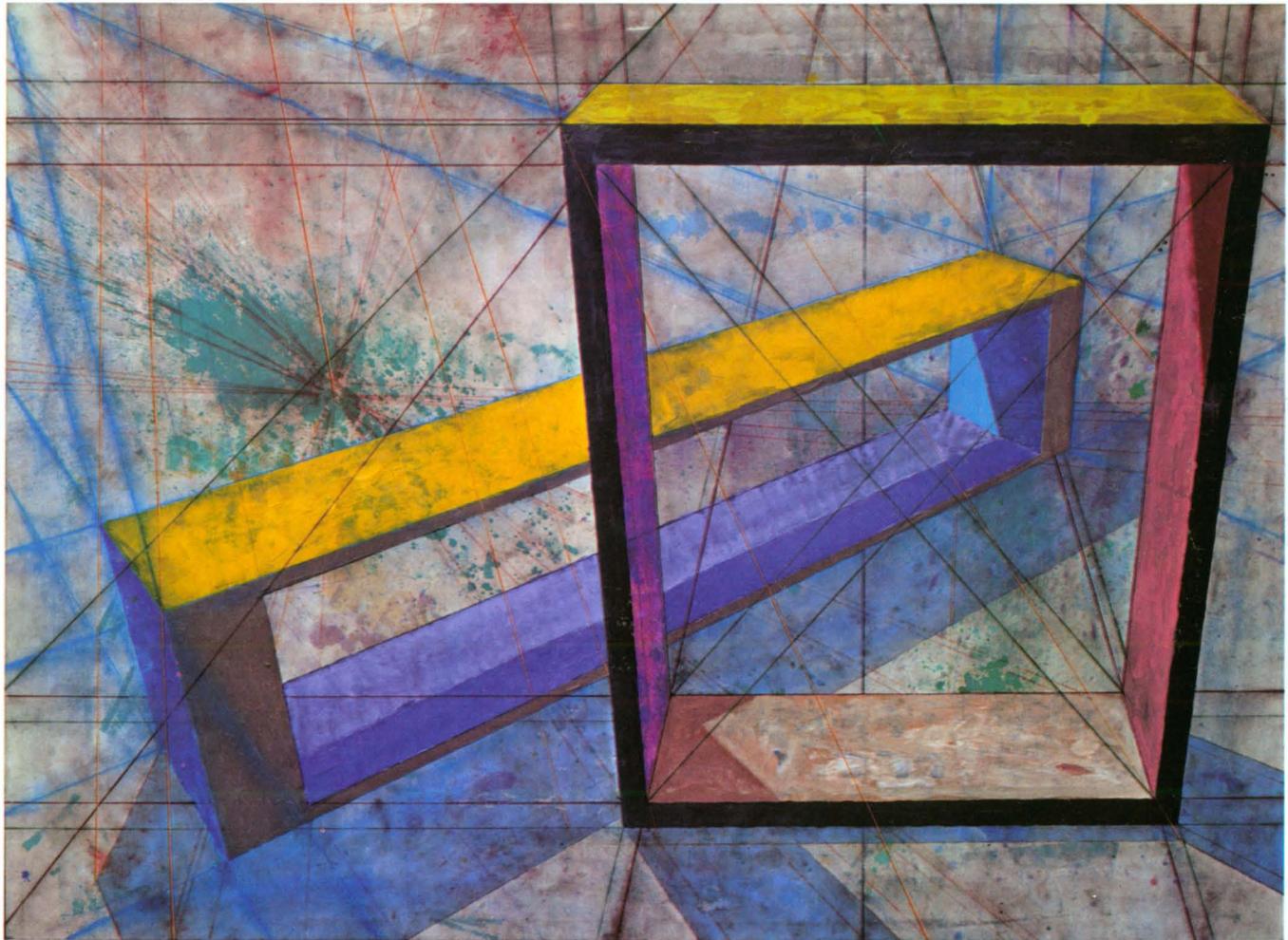
In 1965 Davis moved south to Los Angeles and began work on the group of monochromatic, shaped canvases that would constitute his first one-man show that fall at Nicholas Wilder's tyro gallery on La Cienega Boulevard. (As a Stanford student, Wilder had been working at the Lanyon Gallery when Davis participated in their Summer Invitational the year before.) Davis' first show caused something of a stir on La Cienega, and across the street from Wilder's new gallery, in the tiny office of *Artforum* (now relocated in L.A.), the artist's bi-

partite, oblique geometric panels were enthusiastically viewed as an "interesting criticism of Stella." Many, including Barbara Rose, also saw Davis' canvases as an homage to Stella, whose paintings were well known in Los Angeles through Ferus exhibits and whose work had just been seen again that summer at the Pasadena Museum in Michael Fried's important 1965 exhibition, "Three American Painters." Thus, when a show was arranged the following year in New York and "everybody" was invited to the opening, there was already a small, but select, audience prepared to see Davis' latest works as exempla of their own Greenberg-derived critical positions.

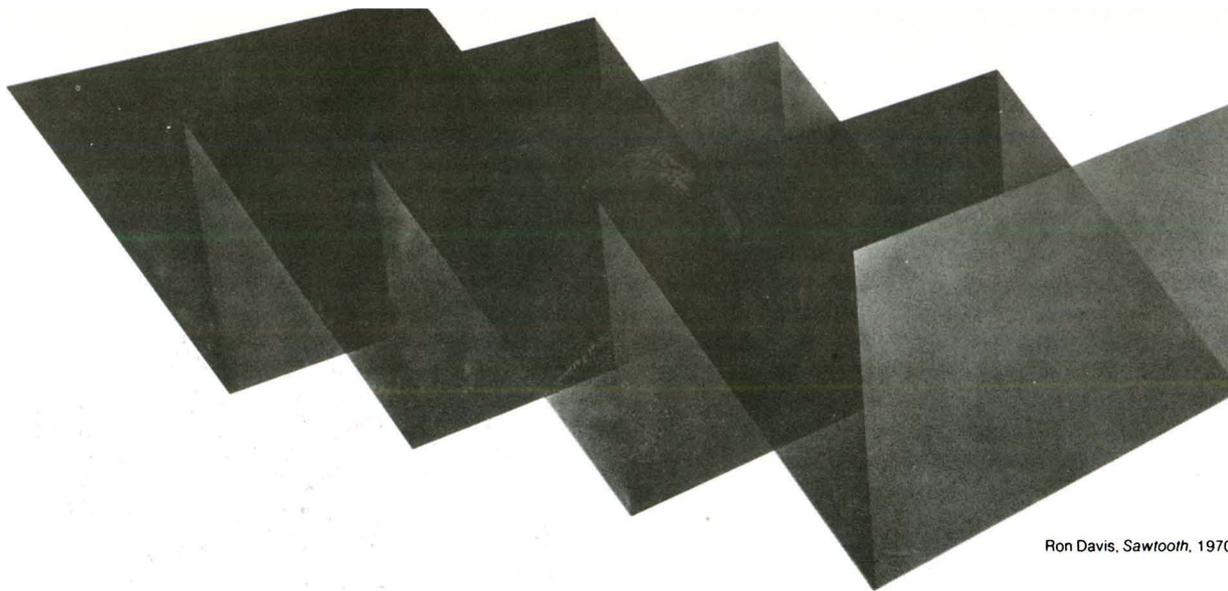
It now seems difficult to understand how Michael Fried reconciled his visual experience of Davis' 1966 paintings—a series of stunning, illusionist works executed in a just-developed technique of resin and fiberglass—with the principles he had enunciated so vigorously the preceding year. At any rate, the fact that Davis' new work was neither "deductive" in its structure, "optical" in its space, nor concerned with the "flatness of the picture support" seems not to have interfered with Fried's approval, though it did, as I shall point out below, force him and others into curiously distorted readings of Davis' work, readings that in turn, I believe, influenced Davis' subsequent paintings. The article Fried wrote for *Artforum* was accompanied by a cover photograph of *Six-Ninths Blue*, and its first sentence should be a *locus classicus* of the type of criticism known as "kingmaking": "Ron Davis," Fried wrote, "is a young California artist whose new paintings,



Ron Davis, *Untitled*, 1968, fiberglass 60 x 144".



Ron Davis, *Frame and Beam (484)*, 1975, vinyl acrylic copolymer and dry pigment on canvas, 114 x 157".



Ron Davis, *Sawtooth*, 1970, polyester resin and fiberglass, 5 x 12'.

recently shown at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York, are among the most significant produced anywhere during the past few years, and place him, along with Stella and Bannard, at the forefront of his generation."

It may be that prior editor-dealer-collector enthusiasm helped to create a climate in which such an article could be written; there can be no doubt, however, that the article itself had a catalytic effect on Ron Davis' career. By the following season Davis was known as *the* important young West Coast painter; he had already joined the Castelli stable and he was about to exhibit at the Kasmin Gallery in London; important buyers were lining up; he would be in that year's Whitney Annual; furthermore, he was now recognized as one of the small group of artists defended by the Greenberg coterie; he was well on his way.

Davis has recently acknowledged that early success also had its sour side, that acceptance of his work came before he was ready for it. One of the pressures he has described was that of trying to produce enough work to meet a constantly accelerating demand for his paintings. The year 1969 was a climax of sorts; with two full-time assistants, Davis turned out 102 paintings and prepared five one-man shows. He now talks of that period as a time when he felt as if he were running a "plastics factory." By 1972, Davis had reached an important turning point in his career. Along with a number of other West Coast artists, he became disenchanted with plastics. It seemed to him that he had exhausted the possibilities of resin and fiberglass, that his effects had become facile, that he had forgotten which "burning issues of the '60s" had compelled him to make object-paintings, and that he was, in short, prepared to return, as he says, to "plain ol' painting."

The Oakland retrospective makes a valiant attempt to cover Davis' entire career from 1962 to 1976, from student days through Davis' newest work. It labors, however, under unfortunate restrictions of space. Though including a fair number of major works

(among them *Six-Ninths Red*, *Eleven Colors*, *Dodecagon*, *Zodiac*, and *Arc Fan*) and though weeded well enough to present a highly attractive case for Davis' continuing importance, beyond the '60s, as one of our most impressive West Coast abstract painters, the exhibition is hardly comprehensive—only 27 works selected out of an *oeuvre* now numbering more than 520 paintings. The skimping is evident: no instances of the phase of work exhibited at the Pasadena in 1971 (*Diagonal Rectangle XV*, listed in the catalogue, was omitted apparently for reasons of space); 1970, an interesting year in Davis' *oeuvre*, is weakly represented; the multipartite paintings of 1969 are missing, and both that heavily productive year and 1967 are represented by only one painting apiece. Five small acrylic on linen canvases executed in 1973 and 1974, marking the period when Davis turned away from resin and fiberglass for "health and esthetic reasons," hang, as if ostracized, on a wall outside the gallery proper; within, they might have illuminated the large new paintings that they chronologically precede.

Inside the main gallery, a nonchronological installation (also perhaps the result of space restrictions) permits Neubert certain useful juxtapositions—e.g. a 1962 student painting in the San Francisco Abstract Expressionist manner opposite a 1975 canvas with some equally thick impasto and coloristic echoes—but it also puts obstacles in the path of those who wish to trace the linear development of Davis' art. Nevertheless, the non-sequential hanging does have one benefit: it tends to underline the diversity and imaginative energy of Davis' accomplishment. His one-man shows have been unified characteristically—as a basic idea ingeniously elaborated into an exhibition's worth of variety. But at Oakland one was newly impressed with the playful range of Davis' inventiveness, with just how many disparate visual ideas he has sent out into the world, some to be developed briefly and dropped, others to recur in later styles, in different guises, and with new personalities.

What becomes especially vivid in the Oakland show is the extent to which Davis' work must finally be seen in the familiar line of sensuous, hedonistic California abstraction. Like Richard Diebenkorn (in certain works), like Sam Francis, like Billy Al Bengston (especially in his latest flamboyantly pretty phase), Davis creates an art without *angst*, an art of superior decoration for luxurious delectation, an art that exploits the pleasures of color and light without seeking (as Flaubert said *he* did) the gangrene in lovely places. Seen as a group, Davis' paintings light up the grey walls of Oakland's gallery. They are obstinate presences; they flicker and gleam; they project a solar sense of radiant well-being. His colors, compounded of sunshine and sherbet, jewel-lights and tropical fruits, flesh and pearl, Jello and blue marble, border on the orgiastic.

It is the triumphant effect of certain of the resin-fiberglass paintings to seem to be richly glowing from within. Whether achieved by reflective or iridescent flakes added to the polyester resin (as in *Six-Ninths Red*) or by the brilliance of hue itself (as in the golden glow of the interior of *Eleven Colors*) or by the *éclat* of nervy juxtapositions (as in *Zodiac*), the effect is often glamorous and usually charged with sybaritic energy. Davis' plastic works may require of the viewer that peculiar California tolerance for the special gloss of the plastic unreal, that campy inclination to feast on the shine that is not in nature, but they also combine that bijoulike finish with the force of large scale and a non-precious sense of strong drama.

The armature and frame for Davis' coloristic exuberance is geometry. Color sometimes decorates but usually inhabits the straight-edged shapes that are the informing images of his painting. Davis' iconography grows out of his inclination to perceive the geometric shape as an object in three-dimensional space, and that perception is the constant and unifying theme of his entire *oeuvre*. His geometry is neither mathematical nor ideal; his slabs, dodecagons, fans, arcs, arches, parallelo-

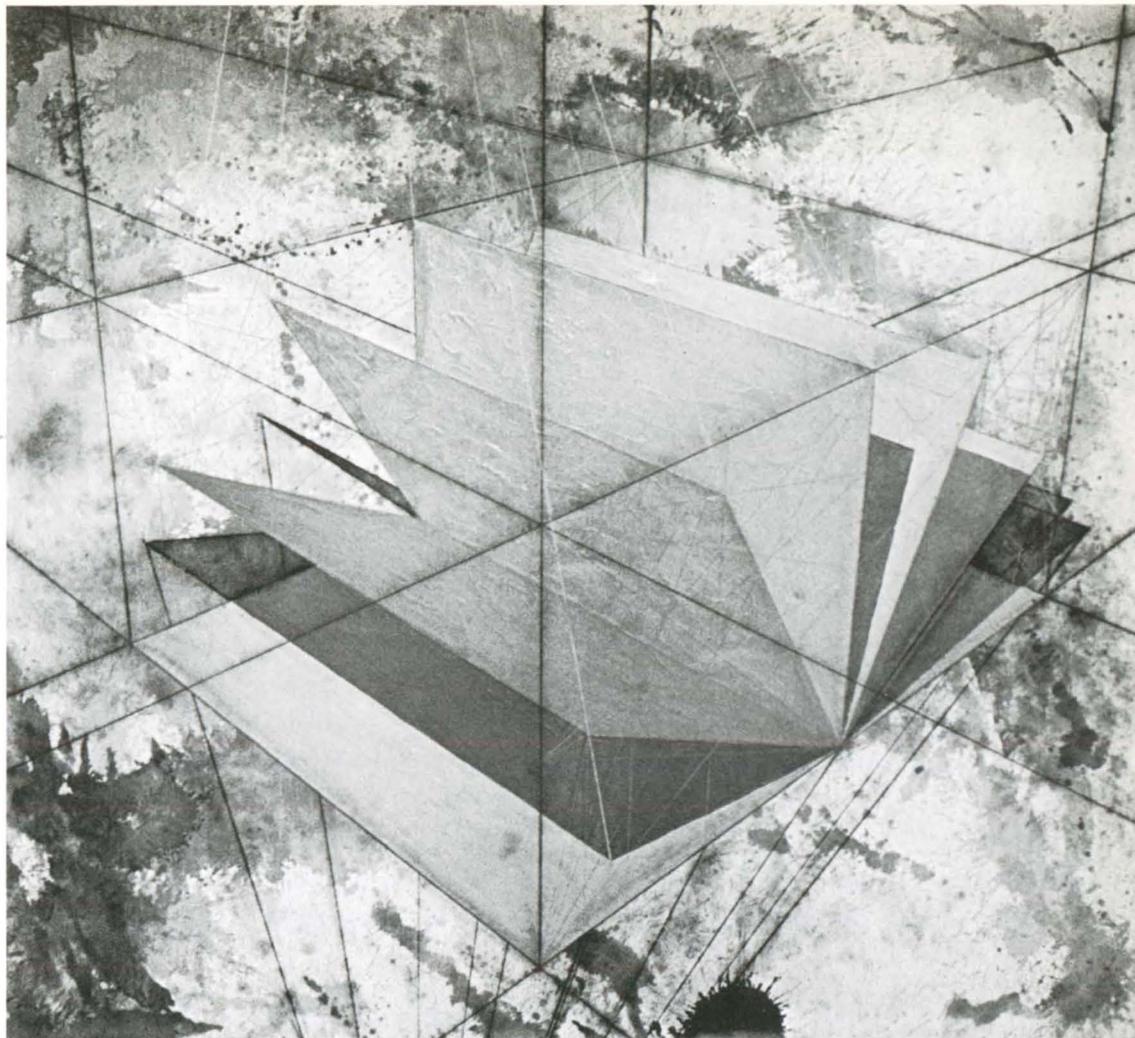
grams, cubes, sawteeth, vents, c-shapes, blocks, frames, and beams are the inventive shapes imagined by a voluptuary of the discipline, not by its student or philosopher. And the space in which he places his forms is as esthetically non-doctrinaire as the forms themselves.

One way of understanding Davis' pictorial history is to chart the evolution of his changing attitude toward his geometric forms. After an early interest in perceptual abstraction, Davis moved on in 1965 to construction of the acrylic and shaped canvas works that are his closest skirmish with modernist space. But even the oblique geometric planes of *Large Red*, for example, can already be read as an illusion, as an isometric depiction, that is, of the way a rectangular plane appears in space.

By the following year, Davis' mannerist bent for the tricks of illusionism fully asserts itself and he deserts even the semblance of flat space. He moves from planar to solid geometry and experiments with the bird's-eye-angle of vision that will become his specialty. (From 1966 on, the optic distortions and drama resulting from that extraordinary point of view are the most frequent *données* of Davis' pictorial world.) Along with his development of the technique of resin and fiberglass, Davis in the '60s was one of those exploring the fusion of two seemingly irreconcilable ideas—the idea of the painting as shaped object and the idea of the painting as illusion. The result of that combination (whether in earlier work by English artists such as Richard Smith or in Davis himself) was indeed a form of visual paradox, but it was as irrelevant to modernist space as Mantegna's illusionist dome in the *Camera degli Sposi*.

Yet Davis' criticism has contained much double talk about the spatial nature of these early resin and fiberglass works. In an attempt to explain away the artist's seemingly retrograde use of perspective and foreshortening, and in the face of his obvious interest in evoking spatial depth on a flat surface, critics have described his techniques as a kind of knowing turnabout, a brand-new modernist ploy. He is variously seen as having "prized" his surfaces "loose" from the rest of his work so that they might be viewed in "unique isolation" from the illusion (Fried); as having cleverly "distended" the generally accepted notion of the surface plane somehow to include the illusion (Annette Michelson); or as having so decisively "identified" the physical character of his plastic surfaces that his illusions, too, were recognized as artificial and hence had become acceptable to modernists (Barbara Rose). What seems obvious today is that without denying the artifice of the painting, Davis in 1966 and 1967 was much more concerned with the trickery of depicting a three-dimensional solid, with creating the dramatic Pop-like illusion of a giant slab in space, than with asserting the flatness of the picture plane.

Oddly enough, however, within a couple of years a change does take place in Davis' pictorial conception, and the literature, instead of being descriptive, turns out to have been predictive. By the end of 1968, in such works as *Spoke* or LACMA's *Roto*, Davis develops a decorative concern with



Ron Davis, *Arc Fan* (520), 1976, vinyl acrylic copolymer and dry pigment on canvas, 114¼ x 127¼"

surface that does set picture plane into conflict with the illusory logic of his geometric imagery. At first, he creates irregular, transparent "holes" in his geometric forms, shapes that leak across planar bodies like outlaw painterly drips. By 1969, in such works as *Zodiac*, *Round*, and *Truncated Pyramid*, the "holes" are filled with paint, and the resulting forms are a parody of Abstract-Expressionist maneuvers. Though Davis never completely sacrifices the illusion of three-dimensionality in these works, his decorative surface does now call that illusion into doubt. By 1971 the illusion of three-dimensionality is attacked even further by a return to plane geometry, and Davis executes works such as *Left Lean* and *Six Plane* in which contiguous transparent planes are arranged in illusory depths, though they themselves seem to have dwindled to the thickness of surface. The idea is tricky, appealing in its ambiguity, but finally somewhat weak as a pictorial conception.

As Charles Kessler tells us in his informative introductory essay to the Oakland catalogue, Davis' last resin-fiberglass paintings were executed in May 1972. When he resumed painting in 1973, Davis' medium was acrylic paint on conventional rectangular linen canvases. His subjects were once again illusionistic geometric solids. Now, however, these forms are lodged in depicted three-dimen-

sional settings; tightly ordered, impeccably executed, they have opaque surfaces and no decoration other than brilliant color. These crisp, exercise-like images can be read as reductive still lifes in austere barren surroundings or even as plans for some neo-classical, Ledoux-like ideal architectural project located in an abstract landscape. When this severe style gives way about a year or so later to the expansive and painterly romanticism of Davis' recent large paintings, the contrast is astonishing. Many of the geometric forms of the new works are like old friends, but now these fans, arcs, beams, and slabs are fixed in giant nostalgia-colored, horizonless landscapes and surrounded by hazy atmospheric fields. Their colors are not so much subdued as closely orchestrated. Abstract-Expressionist stains, blots, splatters and other maculae invade the canvas, extended perspective lines (originating in the geometric objects) form ambiguous three-dimensional grids, and illusionistic light and shade play dreamily over the entire composition. If these canvases are rich and, in a modern sense, intensely picturesque, they are also oddly mature in their feeling—almost as if they were the fond memories of old age, the works of an artist looking back with regret and re-creating in a roseate haze a gentler version of the glorious physical things of his youth. ■