

Art That Makes Its Own Light

"**I** EAT AWAY the corners with the light," said Phillip Pavia the other day when discussing his recent marble carvings. And that is precisely what he does. His is an art that makes its own light, but a light which miraculously never destroys the form, the material, or the color of his luminous marble slabs. His work depends on sharp cutting edges that do not diffuse so much as divert light.

"Everywhere I see edges, corners. I'm conscious of the paradox that weds hard, fixed boundaries to a soft flow of light and air," Mr. Pavia observed. From his third-floor Bowery studio he looks out on roofs, water towers, and other angular architecture. "For a long time I liked the moving image, the bellowing in and out image. I guess I was always involved with light but finally I realized that the straight edge (a city image, you rarely see it in the country) was also a strong part of my life."

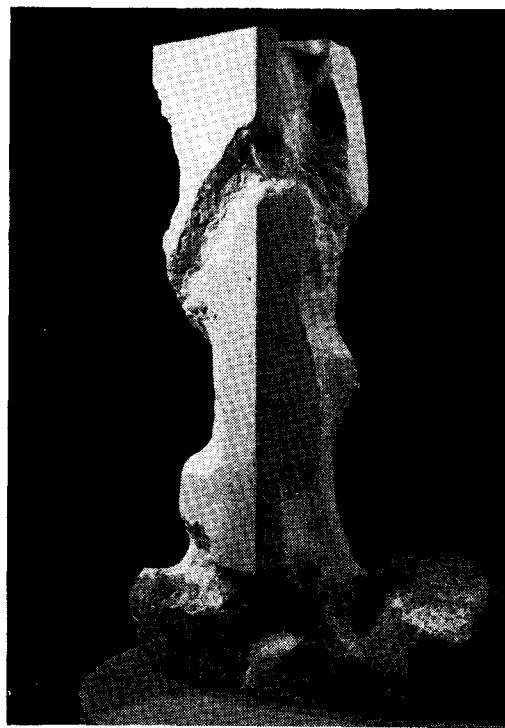
And so Pavia plays the material against the immaterial, capturing volatile light by the deliberate manipulation of heavy, often massive stone. Indeed, I can think of no other contemporary marble-carver who is working in such heroic dimensions. Any stone sculpture, let alone marble, is out of fashion these days, but, curiously, Pavia often seems

more the innovator than many of his metal-minded colleagues. To be sure, new materials are important, yet new ideas are harder to find. Though earlier this artist worked chiefly in bronze and wax, he is now an authority on marble, on its every source, nuance, and idiosyncrasy.

As Pavia notes, he "didn't come by this knowledge through reading books;" his father was an Italian stonecutter and Pavia himself had already joined a New York stone-carving atelier in 1930 when he was only eighteen. If his bronzes allowed him more freedom, his present marble sculpture achieves far greater intensity. A prodigious worker, he has carved eighteen tons of stone during the last four years.

For him symbolism is secondary. What he makes is first a stone construction. No anthropological relationships are intended, no memories of flesh, though at times he depends on a sensuous pink marble that in other hands might become evocative. His sculpture is what it is, an expression of the medium itself. And this is eminently in character, since Pavia was the original editor of a current art magazine called *It Is*.

Presently on view at Manhattan's Martha Jackson Gallery is a small group of his recent marble carvings. Among

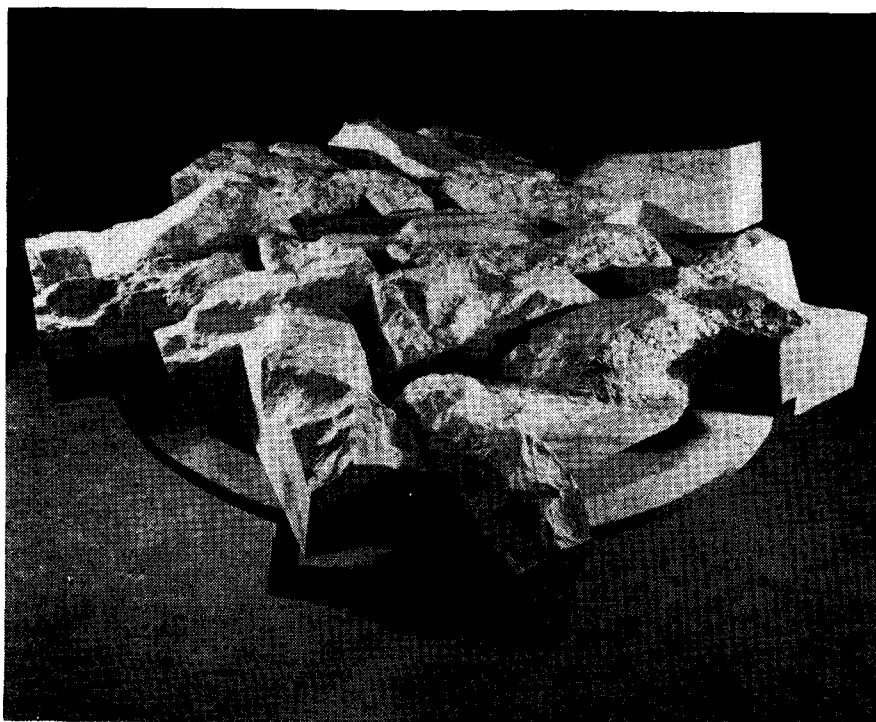


Yellow Sail: Collection, Southern Illinois University.

the most challenging is a large composition called *Lily Pond*, a sculpture which unfortunately does not photograph well. This compilation of more than twenty large slabs of African marble, carved, rubbed, and fitted together, becomes in reality an undulating interrelated mass. By means of irregular indentations and a horizontal rippling motion, the artist suggests light bouncing off water, but the patterned marble itself is never slighted.

We see *Lily Pond* first of all as an integrated stone carving, second as a trap for light and motion. Not surprisingly, one of Pavia's favorite artists is Monet. The varied color of the marble also adds to the illusion of fluctuating light and shadow. Certain slabs are blue-black, some are violet, some stark white, others are veined with salmon. Never highly polished, the stone is deliberately left free of reflecting surfaces. No shiny skin subverts nature's rich underpainting, for here the material is the means.

Pavia's work is closely related to the abstract expressionist movement. He once said, "The abstract painters—Pollock, de Kooning, Kline—inspired me to relight the fire and carve directly again." And so after twenty years he returned to marble. Working spontaneously by trial and error he arrives at his final compositions. Before he settles on a satisfactory solution, stone slabs sometimes weighing more than a hundred pounds must repeatedly be moved, tilted, and related in color, texture, shape, and form—a task that for Pavia is less a restraint than a physical burden. Operating very much like Mondrian whom, by the way,



Lily Pond: Unfinished.

he greatly admires, Pavia substitutes heavy stone for colored tapes.

That he has chosen to use a material scarcely adapted to spontaneous expression is something of an enigma. In any case, he is convinced that only through the doing does a work of art assert itself—a philosophy very much out of favor today when artists are relying more on impersonal industrial methods than on human intervention. With Pavia one feels the artist's chisel at work; one senses the action of his own hand, for he always carves directly. Rarely related to the erosions of age, his indentations rather suggest the processes of becoming. Like a young geology, these carved stones seem still in the making.

"I want my sculpture to move in one direction," Pavia says. His aim is a single focus for each work, but always relieved by an interior motion that interpenetrates one mass with another. He produces a composite organism in which all intersections, voids, swellings, and even marble veins move toward the viewer. This is especially true of *Lily Pond*, a massive assemblage that has its own specific direction. It cannot be viewed equally from all sides.

Never intended to resemble finished monuments, though carved from monumental material, these sculptures seem to have grown rather than been made. Pavia is fond of Stonehenge, where mysteriously placed slabs have become an integral part of the landscape. Here he feels "the caressing attraction of stone for stone," and tries in his own work to achieve the same casual inevitability.

Also on view are a number of vertical pieces (*Lily Pond* is Pavia's first ambitious horizontal sculpture), all of them, however, motivated by the same principles. *Yellow Sail*, carved three years ago, exploits a clean sharp edge to bend light at will. A combination of yellow and pure white Italian marble, this small sculpture has an immediacy rare in stone. Several abstract watercolors underline Pavia's persistent interest in fragile color relationships, straight edges, block-like forms, and, above all, in light.

—KATHARINE KUH.



Instant Tennessee Williams

MOVIES HAVE BEEN adapted so frequently from the works of Tennessee Williams that Hollywood is now able to whip up the familiar Southern mixture with very little help from the master himself. *This Property is Condemned* was "suggested," so the credits inform us, by the short Williams play of the same title. In that play a boy and a girl were on stage, and through their dialogue a story emerged of a fated young woman, Alva Starr by name, who drifted into a life of shame. The movie keeps the same basic framework, but the body of events has been largely filled in by three screenwriters—Francis Coppola, Fred Coe, and Edith Sommer—who have figured out how Williams might have written the whole story if he had wanted to go to greater lengths.

The scene is a little Mississippi railroad town called Dodson, the time is the Depression, and Alva Starr has been brought in from the wings, so to speak, to fill center stage. The resulting film, produced by John Houseman and directed by Sydney Pollack, is Tennessee Williams turned out to order: There is the wistful, sleazy Southern girl; the decayed boarding house in which she resides with her slatternly mother and kid sister; the long, hot summer; the handsome stranger; and the drawling dialogue. Everyone talks in slow declarative questions, just as they do in genuine Tennessee Williams stories. The resemblance is astonishing.

Nevertheless, it's ersatz. For one thing, the shaping of the story is neater than genuine Williams; where he provided mystery, a few strands, and several haunting loose ends, there is now carpenter-like construction. The tragic tale that unfolds is less suspenseful than expected, and very close to triteness as it heads remorselessly for the kind of climax that Williams himself surely would have avoided.

Yet there is a good deal to be said for the movie. The part built for Natalie Wood is workable and, as Alva Starr, she shows herself not only to be fully professional but manages to extract several genuinely moving moments. Miss Wood deserves much credit, for she has had to surmount several moony speeches provided by the writers purporting to show her dreaming, wishing, and wanting that unrealistic world far down those railroad tracks. But she's altogether fine at suggesting Alva's flirtatiousness and easiness, her seduction by the stranger from New Orleans (Robert Redmond),

and her pathetic end. Redmond is good, too, as the young man who comes to town as a railroad "spotter" with the mission of cutting down the work force, and, as a consequence, the patronage of the boarding house.

Sydney Pollack's direction is atmospheric and fluid, James Wong Howe's color photography is quite beautiful, and, all in all, Williams is not too badly served. Now the next step is for Hollywood to invent Tennessee Williams movies on its own—that is, if it can think of the titles.

DORIS DAY movies are also a staple Hollywood manufacture, and the latest model, *The Glass Bottom Boat*, is fully up to date in that it has Miss Day falsely suspected of spying for a foreign power while working as a guide in a space plant. But while this movie is as glossy and improbable as all the rest, it is easily the funniest. It was undoubtedly made so by that expert at farce, Frank Tashlin, who has taken a not entirely brilliant screenplay by Everett Freeman and generously larded it with slapstick.

Mr. Tashlin has done something else that is, perhaps, more remarkable. He has come close to unfreezing Doris Day. Instead of a slightly over-age virgin preserving her cinematic purity to the bitter premarital end, she is this time seen as a youngish widow, with quite normal sensual yearnings for Rod Taylor, who plays a genius very high up in the space program. She almost seduces him, too, and is prevented from doing so only by the zany plot antics.

If these sometimes grow broad and strained, the greater part of the movie is made up of more than ordinarily inventive slapstick, engaged in by some very funny people. Paul Lynde as an overly zealous security guard is as delightful as we have come to expect, and I enjoyed watching both Dom De Luise and Dick Martin, who are new to me. Arthur Godfrey makes a pleasant appearance as the skipper of a glass bottom boat—not that the boat has much to do with the story. In fact, so zephyr light is the story that it's hardly worth mentioning. With Tashlin moving things along in high gear, however, a traditional Hollywood farce, with a traditional pairing of stars, becomes better than average Hollywood comedy. —HOLLIS ALPERT.

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

Column One should read: 2, 7, 6, 10, 1, 4, 8, 5, 3, 9.

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