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Art: Radiant Prints by Richard Smith

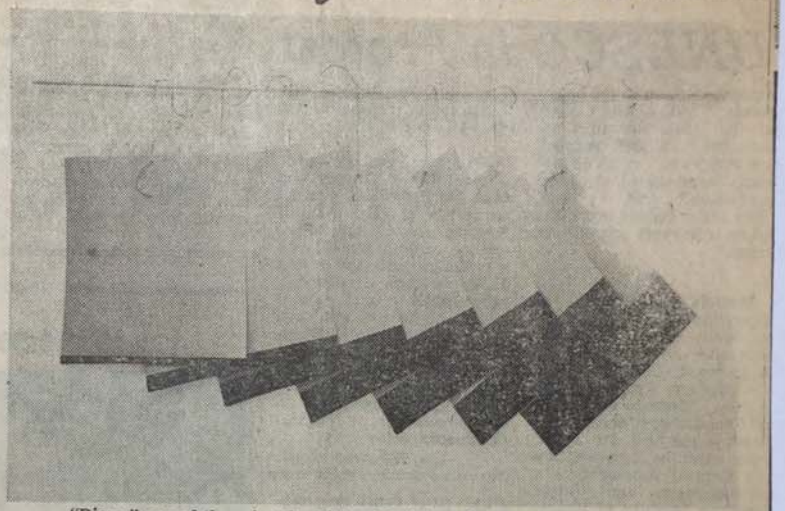
By JOHN RUSSELL

For the best part of 20 years Richard Smith has been one of the most inventive colorists around. But what to do with that gift? How best to support it, structure it and keep it from getting out of hand? Difficult questions, those. But he solved them to general admiration in a retrospective at the Jewish Museum, and at the British pavilion in Venice, when the Venice Biennale was still the most important exhibition of its kind, and in a second retrospective last summer at the Tate Gallery in London.

What he did was to shift his ground with a swordsman's agility. Sometimes the color was carried by a construction of wood and canvas that jutted out into the room. Sometimes it fell downward like a waterfall, or folded backward like the flap of an envelope, or was stretched taut on metal struts like a smoked haddock. Sometimes it was skied like a kite, and sometimes it was stepped and graded like a baroque staircase. In every case a neat and nimble intelligence was behind it.

In physical terms Mr. Smith's new prints (at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, through tomorrow) are quite slight. They consist of overlapping plaques held together with string and tacked onto the wall. But the color has a disembodied radiance that gains by that very lack of pretension.

Where other artists strive to arrange areas of pure color in patterns that might conceivably say something new, Richard Smith just hangs them in a carefully thought-out sequence and leaves them to speak for themselves. They remain what they are—discrete and disparate patches of color, arranged in a variety of simple progressions — but magic comes of it.



"Diary," one of the prints by Richard Smith at the Museum of Modern Art

Other exhibitions include the following:

The Formative Years Visual Arts Gallery, 209 East 23d Street): The Visual Arts Gallery does more with almost nothing than many a well-budgeted museum. In the context of a school buzzing with life, it puts on just the kind of show young people need to quarrel about; in this case, a survey of the formative years of artists who ended up looking quite different.

Visitors will find, for instance, a painting of a locomotive (1942) by Franz Kline, a farm landscape (1933) by Jackson Pollock, an expressionistic female nude (1955) by Anthony Caro and a mother and child (1938) by Mark Rothko, together with early works by Roy Lichtenstein, Lee Krasner, Jules Olitski and others.

There's no catalogue, and the installation is minimal, but there's a sense of history being made to work. Watch the hours, though: Monday through Thursday, 12 to 9; Friday 11 to 4:30; closed Saturday and Sunday.

Ben Nicholson (Andre Emmerich Gallery, 41 East 57th Street): Ben Nicholson in his 80's is still one of the great incisors. Given pencil, burin or razor blade, he will trace the kind of line that is his alone. That line has a sardonic, teasing quality, but it also finds grandeur where most of us wouldn't look for it, and it does a memorable job of characterization.

Mr. Nicholson can take a tumbler or a pair of shears and give them a character, an obstinate and irresoluble quiddity, which we just don't associate with objects that are made in large numbers.

With architecture he does something quite different. He feels his way all round it and pulls it out of shape until it takes its place in that vast family of forms he has made his own. He can do this with a supremely beautiful building like the cathedral in Siena, and he can do it with an anonymous cottage on the island of Mykonos. In the one case, as in the other, the incision has behind it 60 years of rumination. Through Dec. 31.

Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Morris (Leo Castelli, 4 East 77th Street): An anthology of museum class, dominated by one of the most commanding of Robert Morris's felt sculptures. Made in 1973, it is 6 feet high and 12 feet across.

The three lengths of felt Mr. Morris uses are in differing shades of gray and pink, and as they hang down from the wall and spread out across the floor, they make the kind of august plain statement for which we look to the architecture of the Lion Gate in Mycenae. The weight, the texture, the self-echoing solemnity of the forms — all these work upon us and add up to a most remarkable achievement.

The sense of dread this piece whips up with such startling economy could not be more happily dispelled than by the Ellsworth Kelly (in the back room), which is one of the most festive of Mr. Kelly's paintings. Through Dec. 20.

Vienna Secession Posters Reinhold-Brown Gallery, 26 East 78th Street): Vienna before 1914 was the center of a vast empire and had precisely the omnivorous appetite that vast empires make it possible to gratify. Thus it is that the posters assembled in this new gallery reflect not only the Vienna of Klimt, Schiele and Alfred Roller but also the elegant fancy of Leon Bakst in St. Petersburg and the meaty male figures in mountain scenery that were the specialty of Ferdinand Hodler in Switzerland. Through Dec. 31.

French Posters 1890-1930 (Hammer Galleries, 51 East 57th Street): More posters, from Chéret to Cassandre, this time. Chéret, from whom Seurat took something; Cassandre, who as much as anyone epitomized the look of the streets of Paris between 1925 and 1939. Toulouse-Lautrec, Steinlen, Ibels and Bonnard are there also, but for the Proustian the key exhibit is Chéret's poster from the "Theatrophone," thanks to which Proust could lie in bed at home and listen to "Pelleas et Melisande" from the Opéra-Comique (not least, the passage that gave him hay fever.) Through Dec. 4.