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Egan Show - 1954-55

It began to be evident to R. that Eleanor Ward was losing her nerve. The hostile reaction by critics and other painters "stopped her." Their relations became difficult, in any case.

At the same time, R. was not totally immune to the charges against him. If so many people were doing things another way, and calling his white and black paintings "anti-art," he thought, maybe he'd better find out if it were true. It was at this point that he started his series of red paintings, using the color that was most difficult for him, the strongest, the least austere. Culminated in Charlene (1954), done in 4 panels, each panel done separately; first picture with light bulb; bought by Ileana.

Egan ~~xxx~~ Jack Tworkov called one day to say he was bringing Egan down to the studio. Egan's gallery was the best in New York then -- it had DeKooning, ~~Pollock(2)~~, Kline, Guston, Tworkov and several others. But Egan hadn't taken on a new painter in years, and R. did not expect to be taken on by him. He was eager to see what Egan's reaction would be, though. Egan came down and didn't seem especially enthusiastic. But at the end he asked R. how soon he'd be ready for a show. R. said about a week. Egan ~~xxx~~ gave him a month.

The red show opened before Christmas, 1955, and was extended two weeks? months. (see Egan invu). Once again, the reaction was almost total hostility, no sales, and a lot of enfant terrible publicity. Among the highly interested observers this time, though, was Leo Castelli.

(Note: R. liked Egan and stayed with him until the gallery folded two years later. Egan used to spend most of his time in Scraffts, drinking. He felt anyone who wanted to buy anything would know where to find him, no point in sticking around the gallery. He also took in Ellie Poindexter, who was supposed to learn the gallery business, take care of tiresome details, and provide the money. She did a good deal more than that, finally undermining him to the point where she could issue an ultimatum to Egan -- get out, or be sued. Egan got out).

"Bob is a gentle, poetic sort of guy, and that was the quality in his pictures."

Egan went down to Fulton Street with Tworkov, the first time. Rauschenberg "brought out all kinds of stuff, fascinating ~~pictures~~ things. I always like to hook things up historically, and I remember asking Jack what it made him think of. Jack didn't have any particular association, but I said at the time it made me think of Lautrec. The Lautrec of the dance hall posters and the whores, revelling in all that life. 'New' is a funny word, you know -- nothing's ever really new. Anyway, that was what I thought."

R. stayed with Egan until he closed the gallery two years later, in 1956. ~~xxx~~ (Egan says he has no marketing ability -- he quit and took a job, later returned to present space on E. 79th. His artists ~~xxxx~~ went on to make a lot of money, but he apparently never did).

Egan says R. was not at all cocksure then. He "had a healthy amount of self-doubt." At the same time, he didn't lack ego in his dealings with the world. What Egan liked was his honesty -- "Bob's always been completely honest about his work."

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Gene Moore, Display Director for Tiffanys

Rauschenberg came in one day, frösh from Black Mtn, with blueprints. Moore used them for a big display in all windows of Bonwits (was display man there for 16 years, until two years ago ~~xxxx~~ -- now Tiffanys only). This was the first contact. Later, Moore used R. and Johns regularly, and he says it was "an ideal working relationship." They were highly conscientious, always did the work on time, were utterly dependable. Their work was meticulously executed. Mostly highly realistic simulations of natural settings -- rocks, woods, a highway with telephone poles, trees with ice on limbs, and a swamp scene that was "really slimy, with real water" trees coming out of ooze, feeling of snakes etc.

Moore says Johns was the more meticulous, but that they worked wonderfully together and complemented one another. R/. extremely fertile with ideas. Moore would tell them what he wanted and let them work it out their own way, with no interference.

Moore put their paintings in the windows at Bonwits occasionally, not because he liked them (he didn't) but because he felt that the purpose of display was not just to show what you liked but what was going on, a kind of reporting. Says he got plenty of complaints about R.'s work, relatively few about Jasper's. "I just didn't dig Bob's stuff, and I used to kid him about it all the time. Once I remember going down to his studio to see about a job, and Bob said Oh, I want you to see my new painting, and he took me over and showed me an absolutely blank canvas. I said, where is it? But we got along wonderfully."

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Charles Egan

Egan was very much involved personally with the new American art movement, postwar. Was one of the founders of The Club, along with Pavia, Kline, etc. It started with them all sitting around Washington Square in the evenings (this was before the days of the folk singers), discussing everything. The cops used to chase them out at midnight, when they would go over to the Waldorf cafeteria on the corner of 8th street and 6th avenue. This wasn't so good, because it was often full of drunks, and there were too many interruptions. So they got the idea of taking a loft on 8th street and giving everyone a key. Pavia gradually made the thing public, invited guest speakers, etc, and "it got out of hand." This was really the center of all the ferment, together with the Cedar Bar. A lot of drinking, wild talk, anger, love, dancing. Everyone came down -- Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg, Europeans in town, etc.

Egan had a gallery at 46 East 57th Street, and was interested in the whole group coming up from Black Mountain College -- Albers' people. "Albers was a key figure. Although he came from an entirely different background -- from Europe, the Bauhaus -- and represented a different kind of art, he was sympathetic to artists and he didn't try to force them to do things his way." Egan had DeKooning, Kline, Guston, Tworkov, Nakian, and others. Tworkov kept urging him to go down at look at Rauschenberg. He did, and liked him immediately.

Egan's Rauschenberg show was in 1954. He called it "Joyeuse Noel," because it was near Christmas, and because the pictures seemed to him to be so joyful and ebullient. "I loved the show." Morton Feldman played a concert there one Sunday evening. "It was really beautiful." But he says it made very little splash, except mong other artists. Some of them hated it and said so; really offended. Two bought pictures.

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