

CONRAD MARCA-RELLI

THE EARLY YEARS

BY CARTER RATCLIFF



Conrad Marca-Relli, R-I-4-58 (White Night), 1958. Painted canvas collage. 56 x 77", Courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

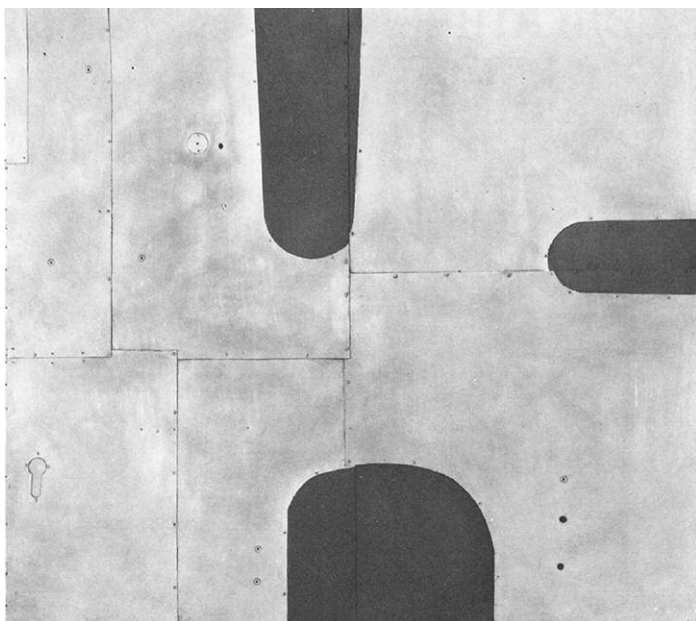
Conrad Marca-Relli's paintings from 1955-63 have more texture than the best-known sculpture from that period. He gives evidence of his touch even in smooth metal collages; it shows along the edges of their flat steel sheets. His paintings offer a variety of fabrics, from oil cloth to burlap, played off against viscous or tarry or stained-in pigment. This gives Marca-Relli, a member of the New York School's first generation, something in common with a minimalist sculptor: both are interested in physicality, an aspect of objects which, for all its familiarity, appears in a wide range of modes.

The clash between conceptualists and object-makers reached full intensity at the beginning of this decade. At that time, the party of object-makers seemed best represented by minimalists because they appeared to have captured, once and for all, the most convincing mode of physicality in art: the brute presence of simple geometric form rendered impersonally in metal, glass, and plexiglass. It was a time when Caro-esque sculpture was being seen as if it were painting, and painting was being seen as disembodied—

"purely optical." Over the last few seasons, younger artists have begun to invert the premises of minimalist materialism with heavily laden, aggressively associational kinds of painting, a development often taken to be a response to the previous eight or ten years.

It's overlooked that painters (and non-minimalist sculptors, as well) have always had to acknowledge physicality, to present it as something other than a brutally obvious aspect of their materials. Traditionally, painters tried to suppress the physical nature of paint, or sublimate it in signs of virtuosic performance—painterly bravura. The history of modernist painting begins with an acceptance of the medium's physicality; then, often as not, goes on to undercut it in an updated manner. The "pure opticality" of American formalism was anticipated by a variety of attempts to suppress the object-ness of paintings. These range from Neo-Impressionist concepts of vision and form to the glazed-over "dream photography" demanded by Breton's second Surrealist manifesto.

Marca-Relli has always gone in another direction, though his forms place him at the center of American modernism. He emphasizes the materiality of canvas by cutting out pieces of it and pasting them to the ground, which is often unprimed; or both cut-out piece and ground are the same color, so that the edge of the piece can only be detected as a sudden shift in the direction of paint-texture. As it insists on its materiality, this pasted-on canvas makes a doubled pictorial reference. Full, taut curves refer to the nude female body. Here Marca-Relli draws on the same associations as do Arp, Brancusi, and de Kooning. Next, curves modulate to angles. Here the reference is to the rectangular canvas where the pasted-on pieces appear. There is a constant shift between physical presence and pictorial allusion, a shift remarked upon at high speed by Marca-Relli's brush-stroke. His paintings contend with *their* physicality by accepting it, but only insofar as it is pictorial. One gets the feeling that he never sees his materials as brute matter. In their rawest, most basic state, they appear to him as imbued with pictorial potential.



Conrad Marca-Relli, XK-120, (L-1-63), 1963. Painted metal collage, 64 x 70 3/8". Courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

Each work owes its particular qualities to the way it balances curved against squared-away form. In his crowded paintings, curves flow into angles and back. These currents eddy up out of shallow space to insist on the surface. The form of the human body, disassembled and put back together again, gets entangled with that of the object, the artwork, which is presenting the body. As physical presence develops the power to refer beyond itself, images which begin as references to form elsewhere are deeply grounded in the physical. What mediates the flow is Marca-Relli's command of its ambiguities. An emphasis on curves draws attention to the human form inhabiting a painting. Emphasis on angles brings forward the presence of the painting itself—not just its textures but its entire structure, *its* body, delimited by its corners and edges. Most of the metal collages are dominated by clear-angled sheets. Despite the blunt flatness of these works, even their physicality is not an end point. The interior structure always refers beyond the frame to industrial architecture and the smooth colors refer to qualities of urban light.

Marca-Relli often holds himself to blacks and whites. When he concentrates on the figure, as in the seated-nude paintings of the early '60s, he employs a range of beiges that recalls

Analytic Cubism at its most complex. Paintings and metal collages with a small number of large cut-out elements are usually dominated by a small number of colors—unprimed canvas, a harsh primary, and black; or two harsh primaries on metal sheets against a plywood sheet painted white. The eye stays always so close to the ground of painting, of the medium itself, that all his colors seem to be primings—first steps not covered up in the course of making the work; instead, they are revealed all the more fully, as the basics of painting are made to elaborate themselves into skittering, surging, ebbing and flowing surfaces.

Even the dustiest tar-black can seem to be a prime coat in Marca-Relli's painting. And when, in *Summer-Noon* of 1958, he uses reds, blues, greens, lavenders and oranges, the atmospheric draw the eye into the weave of the canvas. Marca-Relli's painterly light is strong. In most of his paintings—see especially *White Night*, also of 1958—it's a strangely luminous fog which sets in motion his characteristic modulations. All of them begin with his sense of the way matter, materials, the objects of perception, elude us even as we perceive them. The minimalist notion of matter as sheer, brute presence continues to dominate in the American art world. Marca-Relli's notion is earlier and utterly different. As matter presents itself, then slips away into a reference beyond itself, he encourages it to do so. He knows that neither state—sheer presence or transcendence—is absolute. His art insists with the sometimes feverish, sometimes suave energy of its forms that we acknowledge the richness of this natural instability, and learn to make our acknowledgment self-conscious.