

Review -- ARTFORUM Vol.II #5 1963
Written by Phil Leider, Editor

ARNE HIERSOUX, California Palace of the Legion of Honor: Serial painting — the repetition and elaboration of a single theme or image through a series of paintings — exposes the artist to the greatest risk. In return for the advantages of minimum distraction from the working out of his theme, an atmosphere of obsessiveness which locks the viewer like a vise into the artist's mood, and a purity of presentation, the artist must accept the magnification of any faults in his conception and the failure of everything if the theme or the image will not bear the intensity of scrutiny he demands. Hiersoux's exhibition of serial paintings runs all the risks without falling victim to them, and reaps the considerable benefits of success; it is a fine one-man show.

A single half-formed image dominates every canvas. Bug-eyed, bat-like, vaguely threatening and unsettling, it works its way through the canvases as if the exhibition were in grotesque labor, heaving to bring it forth, fully formed. Sometimes giant wing-forms are suggested as appendages, and at other times a bug-like shape seems more plausible. Whatever it is, lurking half-formed in those canvases, it is Bad; no viewer would prefer to know more about it. A sense of dread, a stirring of old, old guilt is reinforced with every canvas. This artist knows too much.

The threatening quality of this exhibition is immediately established by the subdued, brooding colors in the paintings (some of the earlier ones are collages, the last echoes of a brilliant collage series, in a quite different mood, which Hiersoux had executed during the past year or so). Blacks, dull purples and maroons predominate as they do in a good deal of contemporary Spanish painting. In the Spanish painting, however, it is difficult — no matter with how little basis, it seems — to avoid seeing a political message in those burned-out hues. Here, the overtones are almost completely psychological (though these paintings are by no means politically quiescent).

If the exhibition has a flaw it is that Hiersoux's paint-handling does not seem to spring from the same obsessive roots as does his imagery or his color. Abstract-expressionist in quality, the paint handling seems to demand a separate viewing, independent of the rest of the painting, and on an altogether different level. Paint is handled with a facility, a knowingness and an emphasis on its own extraordinary ability to bring forth emotion that is often at odds with the compressed expression sought for elsewhere.

The California Palace of the Legion of Honor, which has in the past often erred, and erred badly, in its selections of one-man exhibitions, can be proud of this one.

P.L.