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ART

ART; A Show That Ends Where It Begins

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

PURCHASE— AT the Neuberger Museum here, "Al Loving: Color Constructs," an exhibition of selected paintings from the last 30 years, makes a wide loop, ending up where it begins. But the final works carry many of the developments that occurred along the way. Mr. Loving is an abstract painter whose early works show a great dedication to the formal thinking of the mid-1960's. These shaped canvases hint illusionistically at volume or three dimensions even though the surface is resolutely flat. "Cube" is painted as if it were the scaffolding for a solid form.

But Mr. Loving is soon revealed to have aspirations that are obviously more personal than this kind of painting implies. An untitled work from 1973, according to April Kingsley in the show's catalogue, "recalls the strip quilts for which African Americans are known." In discussing it, Ms. Kingsley also mentions Robert Delaunay's solar disk abstraction and Color Field painting in general. The piece is a riot of dyed cloth strips, suggesting streamers. In this bold work, which measures 12 feet across, the initial regularity of the strips breaks down, and in the welter there is an incipient spiral, a motif that preoccupied the artist in the next decade.

Ms. Kingsley opens her essay, "In the Congo a spiral symbolizes spiritual return." Spirals are ubiquitous in black Africa, she says, from house and body decoration to that of graves. Mr. Loving apparently did not latch on to the symbol until after a trip to Cuba in 1986. The spiral is important in the Santeria religion, but in Mr. Loving's hands it becomes a general carrier of energy and means "life and constant growth."

Most of the paintings after 1986 feature spirals in profusion but always against the restraining factor of geometric underpinnings. Why these works are called constructs becomes abundantly clear, as they are amalgams of rag paper, corrugated cardboard and acrylic paint built to have a tough, hide-like surface. A viewer surveying the multiplicity of spirals and the different forms of life energy they evoke experiences great satisfaction, for if there is chaos in the riotous meshing of spirals, there is also discipline: sometimes there is the sensation that the spirals mesh in a complicated harmony, like gear wheels. The works are hung slightly in front of the wall so that shadows are created, which adds another element of complexity.

A kind of distillation has taken place recently. The pieces from 1996 on have the group title of "Power and Love," but the final work in the exhibition, from this year, is called "Continuity No. 1." Viewers will

be surprised but pleased to see that Mr. Loving has returned to the open cube form, which preoccupied him long ago. Although it is predictable in its shape, it is embellished and colorfully adorned, regally displaying three decades of experience.

Mr. Loving's exhibition puts a premium on color and shape. In the adjacent gallery, language carries the day in "The Next Word," organized by Joanna Drucker. Shows about language in contemporary art are legion, but few have examined it from as many angles as does Ms. Drucker. She begins with concrete poetry in which words and images reinforce, or bracingly contradict, one another. The team of Susan Bee and Charles Bernstein makes especially blithe work in this vein, as might be deduced from the title of one of their contributions, "Little Orphan Anagram." Susan Barron's "Mirror" is called a "unique illuminated manuscript," and she takes the "manu" part to heart. The otherwise mute surface contains her hand prints.

The exhibition is densely packed, and viewers might think they are at some sort of trade fair, especially with the section on the practical graphic arts. Here the word is definitely the most important component and is given a designed setting, which advertises it, or shows it to its best advantage. The explosion of artist books in recent years comes from, in part, the impulse to communicate ideas that can be more provocative than conventional media channels allow. Some of the books are put out by individuals, like Philip Zimmerman, whose theme is personal crisis, and Joan Lyons, whose book is a loving tribute to her mother. New technology intrudes in the "Corona Palimpsest" by Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese. Their otherwise conventional book contains a small video monitor displaying a continually moving text.

The artist book has given rise to kindred forms, like billboard advertisements that might be hard to distinguish from commercial messages. Sometimes artists do provide a real service, as the group called Class Action did with a billboard on the subject of domestic violence, which was erected in New Haven and carried a crisis-line phone number along with the message, "He hits me, he hits me not" printed across a large-scale daisy.

The zine, or cheaply printed and stapled magazine, has also emerged as an alternative to sleek journals. One of these is Useless Technology, which keeps its eye on products that the group Critical Art Ensemble claims are being sold to a gullible public, like a VCR with Plus Programming.

The exhibition is almost divided in two with the above discussed categories on one side and pure fine art on the other. Mira Schor, who has long been committed to the interplay of verbal meaning and mark making, spells out the names of colors in crossword-puzzle fashion, using a fluid script on backgrounds that take on, by degrees, the color of the words being spelled out.

Arche Rand uses near neon colors to spell out the names of classic rock and roll performers. In "Rosetta Speaks," Austin Straus proves once again the versatility of collage while Janet Zweig has arranged bundles of computer-generated text into a spiral. It is titled "Her Recursive Apology" and contains 4,386,375 ways to say "I'm sorry."

A sort of appetizer for the museum's major shows is "Four Works by Four Women," selections from the permanent collection mounted near the front entrance. The four are Mary Frank with ceramic works, Joan Snyder and Pat Stier with paintings and the Japanese sculptor Yayoi Kusama with a scintillating life-size rowboat made with woolen gloves sprayed silver. In the current cultural climate, these gloves might be read as the ghost hands of drowned Titanic passengers.

"Al Loving: Color Constructs" and "Four Works by Four Women" continue through Jan. 24. "The Next Word" closes on Jan. 31. The number to call for more information is 251-6100.

Photos: "Untitled No. 32," on dyed cloth, by Al Loving (1975) and "Rosetta Speaks" by Austin Straus (1997), both at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase.
