

# Art in Review

## Carlos Cruz-Diez

(In)formed by Color

Americas Society  
680 Park Avenue, at 68th Street  
Through Dec. 13

The Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez, who has a small, glowing show at the Americas Society, was born in Caracas in 1923 and studied art there. Initially design seemed to be his calling, and he worked in advertising for several years. Then in 1956 he visited Paris, and the trip reinforced his early interest in Seurat and Josef Albers, painters immersed in color theory.

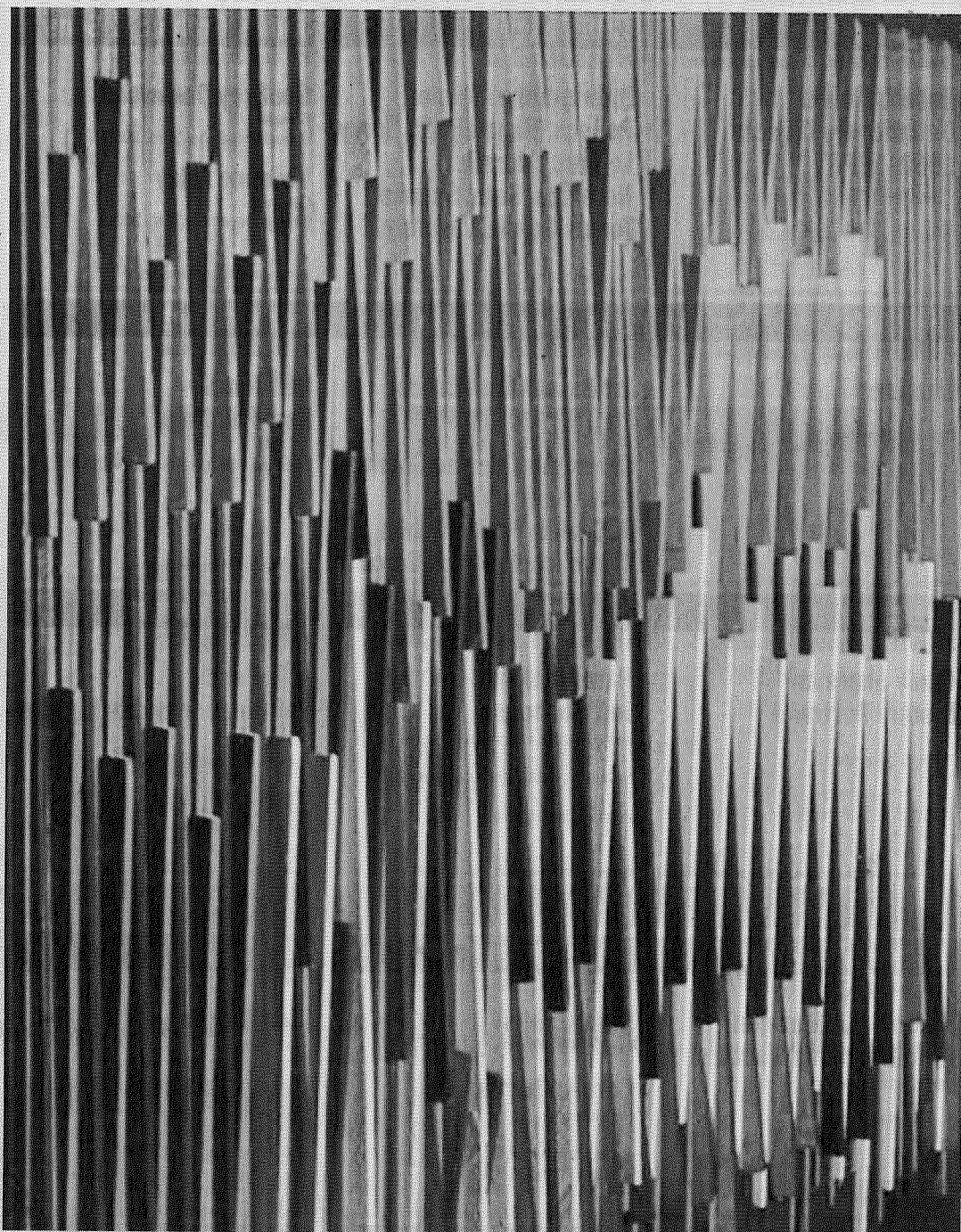
Soon afterward he turned his attention to new strains of geometric abstraction, including Op art, and to kinetic art. He began experimenting with the optical illusion of motion in painting using color as a primary element. In a series called "Physichromie" he combined painting with sculptural relief, fixing vertical strips of painted wood or paper perpendicular to a flat ground. Viewers moving in front of the works had the sensation of seeing the chromatic field shimmer and change, an effect at once gimmicky and magical.

There are several "Fisicromías" ("Physichromies") in the Americas Society show, which was organized by Estrellita B. Brodsky, Isabella Villanueva and Gabriela Rangel. But the centerpiece is the walk-in environment called "Cromosaturación" ("Chromosaturación"). First created in 1968, it consists of a white-box enclosure, about the size of a small studio apartment, divided into sections, with each bathed in lights of blended colors. So intense is the light that the colors seem to be felt rather than seen, like heat. The sensation is slightly disorienting, dizzying, as if gravity had been tampered with.

A younger contemporary artist, Olafur Eliasson, recently created a similar light piece, which seemed to refer to both psychedelia and social bonding. Mr. Cruz-Diez's environments have a social dimension too: the first was installed outdoors on a busy Paris street. But his primary interest seems to be Modernist and abstract, an investigation into color as form, a subject with a long European history.

So European is Mr. Cruz-Diez's sensibility — he has lived mostly in Paris for decades — that some critics question whether he is a Latin American artist at all. His work, they say, makes no reference to the political turbulence of his native country, which may be why he has found a welcoming audience in Venezuela's ruling elite.

Yet the prevailing cliché that Latin American art to be authentic must be about politics or religion has done much to retard appreciation of abstract work. And Mr. Cruz-Diez's art is not unchallenging. By disrupting visual perception it argues against conventional notions of art as passive



TIM LANTERMAN

"Physichromie No. 17" (1960), by the Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez at Americas Society.

and static. And by demonstrating how color changes under pressures of time and space, he suggests, in postmodern fashion, that it is a culturally relative, not universal, phenomenon.

So there's a lot going on here, and more to come, as Mr. Cruz-Diez is still at work. Given his celebrity in Europe and in his homeland, it's hard to believe that this is his first solo show in a New York institution. But when it comes to the art of the Americas, this part of the Americas is still way behind the news.

HOLLAND COTTER

## Irving Norman

Michael Rosenfeld  
24 West 57th Street, Manhattan  
Through Dec. 20

Irving Norman's ambitious, mordantly satiric, social-surrealist paintings are a revelation. The works in this exhibition, which date from 1943 to 1982, envision modernity as a labyrinthine nightmare. Painted with a neat, il-

lustrative touch, they project cartoonish allegories of awesome complexity in which ordinary people are regimented in factories, warehoused in towering prisons and stored in endless phalanxes of hospital beds.

Evil capitalists and fascist dictators, pictured as overblown grotesques, control the machinery of power, and common humanity — often represented as crowds of pathetic, naked figures — is dwarfed by a vast architecture of finance, industry and war. Norman would have made a good illustrator for Philip K. Dick's darkly comic sci-fi novels.

You may wonder why you have never heard of him. A Jewish immigrant from Russia who turned to drawing and painting after fighting in the Spanish Civil War, Mr. Norman (1906-1989) studied at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco and briefly in the mid-1940s at the Art Students League of New York. He was inspired by the magic realism of Peter Blume and George Tooker and by the Mexican

muralists Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros.

Mr. Norman had two exhibitions in New York — at Long Island University, Brooklyn, in 1970 and at the Alternative Museum in 1986 — but he has been largely unknown outside the San Francisco area, where he lived most of his adult life, exhibited frequently and won regional prizes. (A trained barber, he supplemented his income by cutting hair on Saturdays.) In light of current circumstances, Mr. Norman's dystopian vision may strike some New York viewers as eerily pertinent.

KEN JOHNSON

## Kay Rosen

Scareful!

Yvon Lambert  
550 West 21st Street, Chelsea  
Through Jan. 3

No Noose Is Good Noose

Alexander Gray Associates  
526 West 26th Street, Chelsea  
Through Jan. 10