ART

by Jean Charlot

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Leighton Liu presents "Aerosculpture: an exhibition of kinetic structures using moving air as a medium."

Hobby Norton offers three-dimensional objects, "Variations on a theme by Peano — Construction based on a mathematical principle."

Both sets of objects came into being in partial fulfillment of requirements for academic degrees. Knowing this, one would expect a certain restraint, the subdued joie-de-vivre that is expected etiquette in the realm of academic exercises.

Instead there is, on the part of both artists, an obvious glow at tackling their chosen tasks, a delight that easily communicates itself to the onlooker

ONE THING they share: their brand of abstraction is not centered on self, is in no way an inward voyage into the id. Liu's machines, to remain in working order, need obey an objective logic, superseded only by that superior logic that mathematical computations impose on Hobby Norton's sculptures.

Liu got started on his task because he felt that of the four elements — air, earth, water and fire — air remained an esthetic Cinderella. The potter's art deals with earth. The world over, fountains hallow water. Fire and light are blatant extroverts. So Liu came to the rescue of air, manfully.

Man well knows how to make of air a slave. In the past, windmills did grind flour, sailboats crossed the seas. Today there are wind tunnels without which our flying juggernauts would never leave the drawing board, and we dry our hands before hot-air dispensers, a welcome pause in the hubbub of officework. Useful though these are, is it art?

Liu's esthetic machines that funnel air and frame it with a degree of preciousness quite free of any utilitarian purpose help us realize on new terms its worth. His air machines, beautiful in themselves, are good for nothing else but esthetic contemplation. They will not dry hair or hands, or fan us amiably.

Seeing with what care Liu mounts and shapes air as if it was a diamond, we may realize more fully the beauty of a breath of air in the cool of the evening, or, when the time comes, the esthetic experience of exhaling a last breath.

HOBBY NORTON'S structures take us even further from Hamlet-like soliloquies than do the air machines of Liu. They introduce us into a rarefied realm where I, for one, do not breathe at ease. Higher mathematics, curves, equations, make air, by comparison, appear grossly material. To remain faithful to her aim, the artist had to adapt herself to the impersonality of numbers and make her own hand and heart believe in their beauty.

Not that science and art need be antithetic. As a prologue to her learned thesis Hobby Norton sketches the past history of the marriage of science with art: How the ancient Greeks glorified the Golden Section in their architecture. How, in the early days of the Italian Renaissance, men like Paolo Uccello labored a lifetime to discover the cool secrets of perspective.

To my discomfiture, Hobby Norton rushes from the Renaissance to the hard-edged abstractionists of today, thus bypassing the period that saw my birth as an artist. Early in this century, cubists and purists attempted to tie together art and geometry with an intensity not felt since the days of Uccello.

Up to 1900, the basic alphabet of forms—cube, sphere, cylinder, cone—had been deemed rock-bottom truth. Every classroom where drawing was taught had these, cut in wood, as lessons for budding artists.

A master like Cezanne consoled himself from the trivia of appearances by probing deep under the surface of his models for these same shapes, meant as the solid backbone of objective nature.

Cezanne may have been the last among masters who in good faith could believe in Euclidean geometry. Ca. 1910, there filtered into the art world disquieting news of a new approach to form, based on topology. So-called basic forms, far from being rock hard for Peano and the new mathematicians, were pulled and pushed by them into all variations of kidney shapes, what we erroneously call free forms.

The mysterious new crop of curves, far from clinging sagely to a plane, did shoot themselves into space, drilling what up-to-then had been thought of as static shapes with an artillery of geometric atoms.

THE CUBISTS, albeit coarsely, attempted to interpret the new mathematics.

To quote Gino Severini, writing in 1917: "Placing oneself at the point of view of the physical sciences, it is possible to create a new world in a space of four or n dimensions. As the painter Rivera, following Poincare, justly observed, 'A being living in a world with varied refractions, instead of homogeneous ones, would be bound to conceive of a fourth dimension.' This milieu with distinct refractions is realized in a picture if a multiplicity of pyramids replaces the single cone of Italian perspective."

Written more than 50 years ago, Severini's statement breathes the same fever of discovery that informed, in the 15th century, the writings of the men who invented Italian perspective. Now, Hobby Norton, knowing doubtless much more about Peano's theories than did the cubists, replaces the feverishness of the pioneer by the coolness of the practitioner.

With feminine lightness of touch, she manages to bring into the realm of the visible such abstractions as lines, and curves, and equations, without making violence to their basic immateriality. I specifically admired the piece where light funnelled through plexiglass rods suggests to the eye directions and crossways without coarsening them into objectivity.

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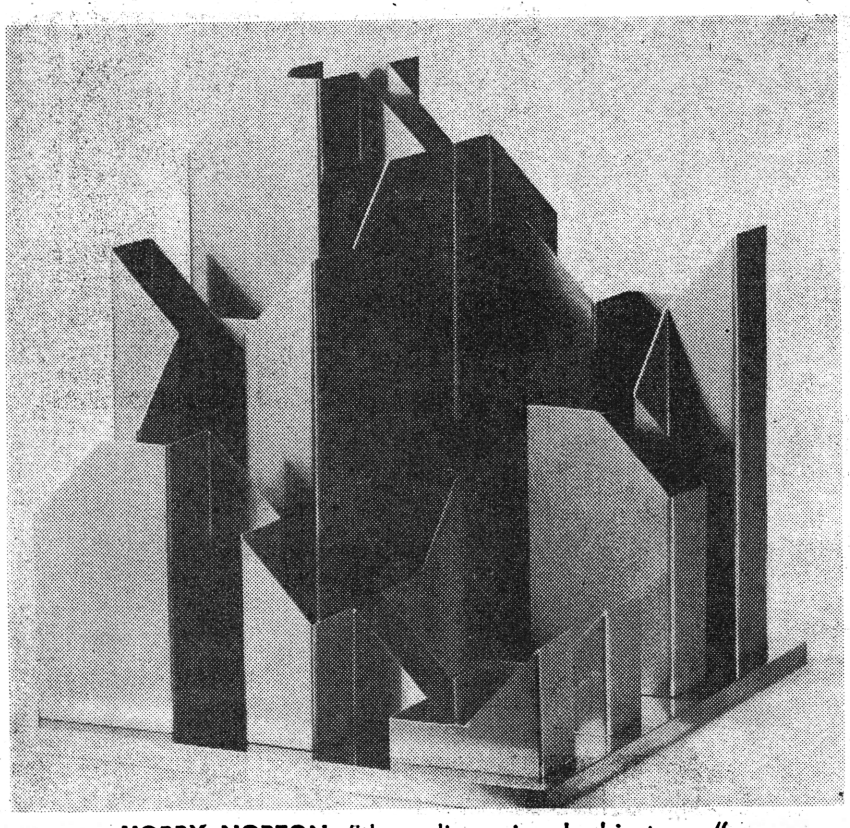
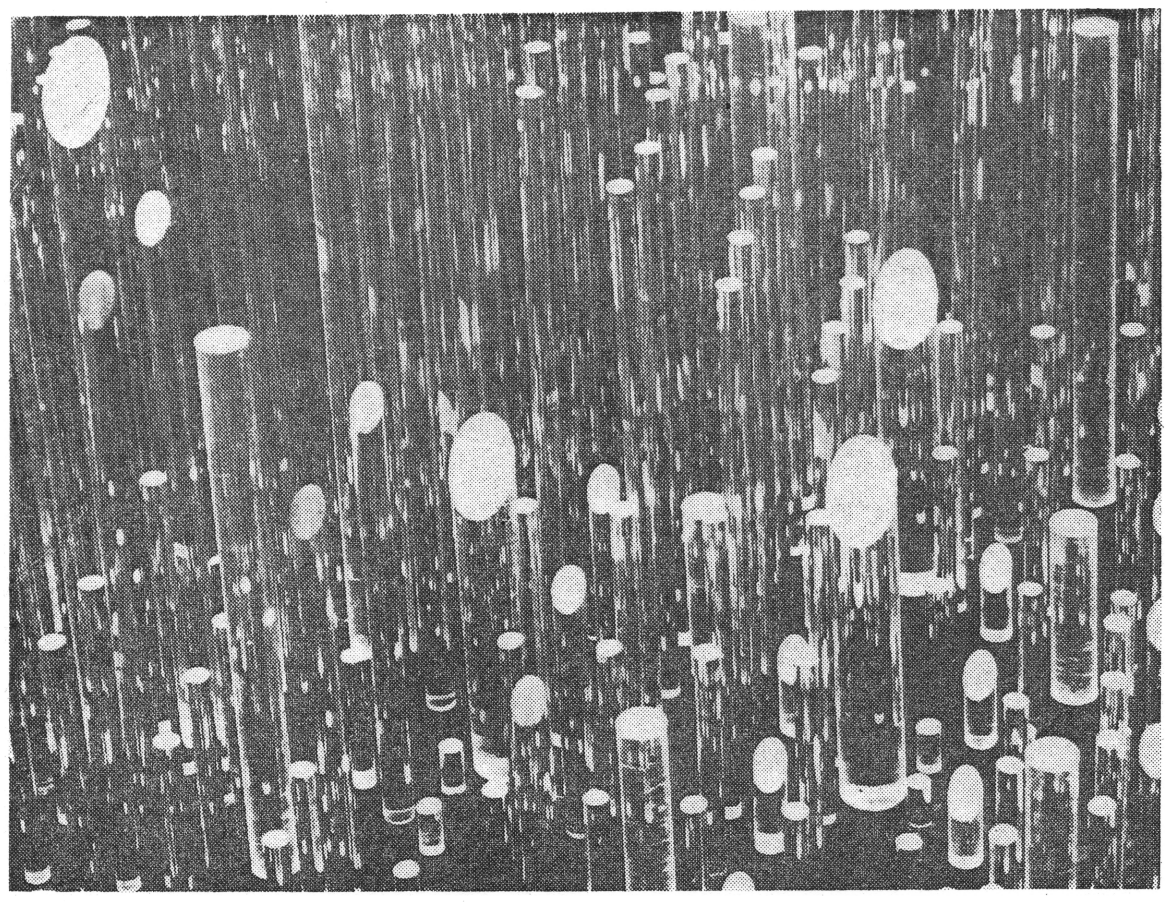
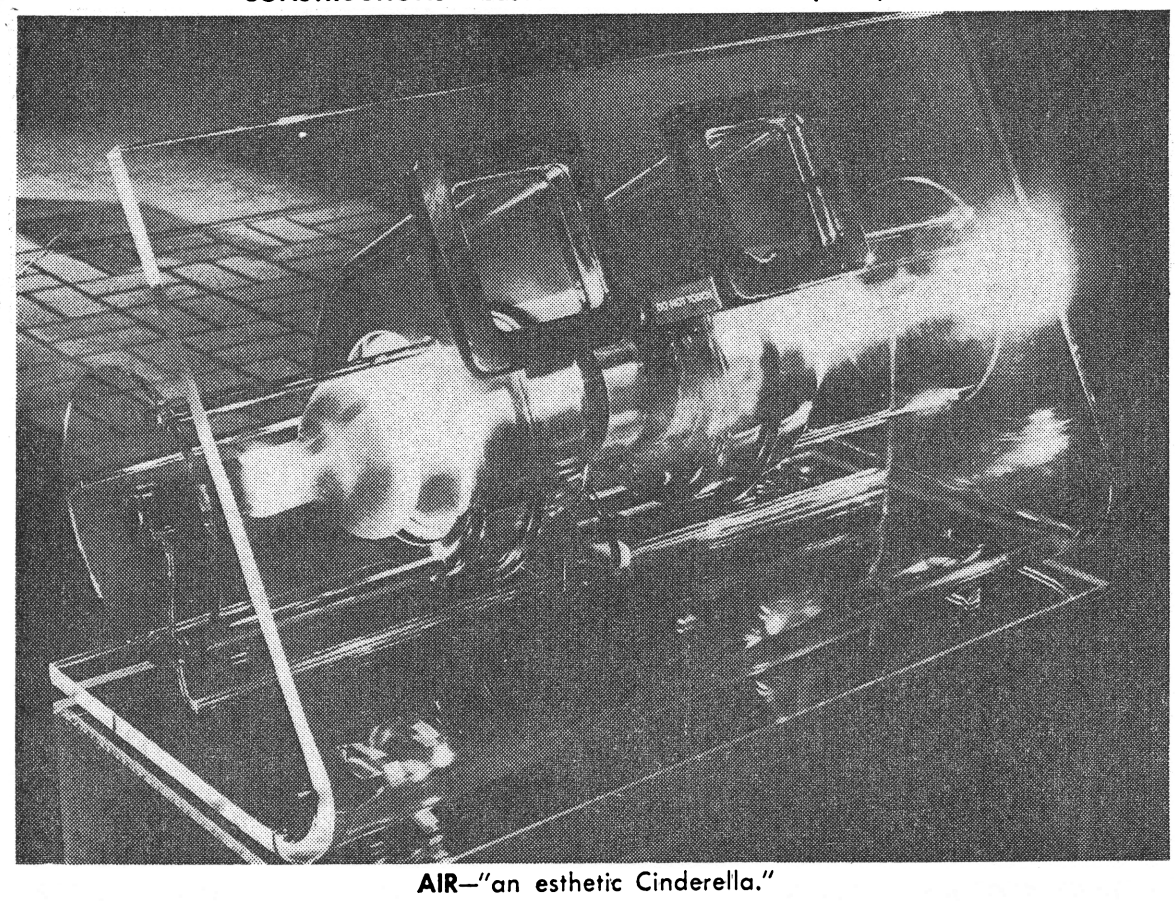


HOBBY NORTON—"three-dimensional objects . . ."

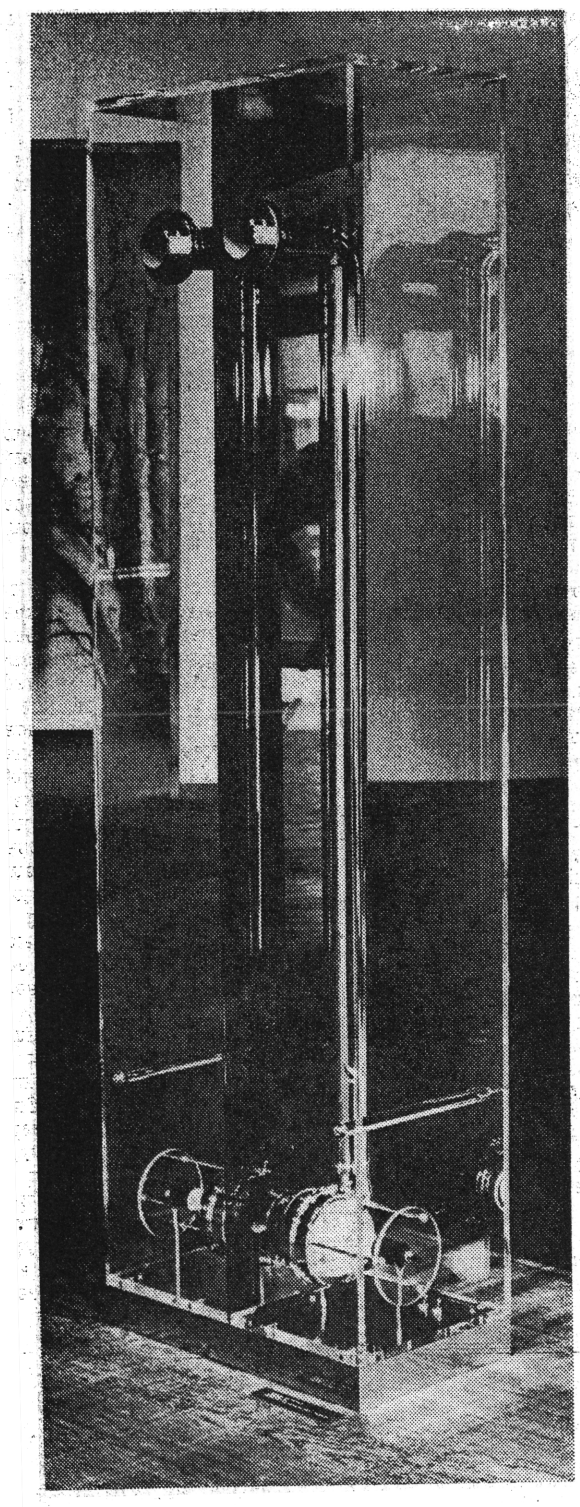


CONSTRUCTIONS—"based on a mathematical principle."



AIR—"an esthetic Cinderella."

Photos by
Warren R. Roll



LEIGHTON LIU—"using moving air as a medium . . ."

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More

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