

Review of Exhibitions

YONKERS, N.Y.

Robert Moskowitz at the Hudson River Museum

Robert Moskowitz's painting has been a blend of representation and abstraction since 1960. Through the '60s and early '70s he developed this vacillating stance to a position of strength, and, as the art world became more open to imagery, Moskowitz's conciliatory approach to painting began to seem less and less quixotic. Without expressionist tactics, and in a subtly pictorial mode, Moskowitz raises one of the central questions of painting: what are our working rules for visual pleasure? This small show of works since 1975 suggests several answers.

Moskowitz's most recent paintings have a way of inflecting and reaffirming our sense of stature. In their big, comfortable formats, they are at once mild-mannered and theatrical—suffused with Epicurean restraint. They sometimes dazzle us with gold and silver borders while always leaving us plenty of psychological space in close-valued colors, especially dark blue with black. They draw us into translucent surfaces with taut contours and loose painterly filler. His paintings of skyscrapers, lighthouses and smokestacks may suggest nostalgia for the Industrial Age, but they also offer new images of luxury within limits.

The group of seven paintings from 1975 to 1977 are all one size and format, although their different hieroglyphs and handling disguise this fact. All are about the reverberation of signs—a hat and cane, a Cadillac and chopsticks—in a pictorial field with ruled lines and two or three colors. The lines imply his use of a proportional system, perhaps the Golden Section; they are also the last vestiges of the interior corners that were Moskowitz's sole subject matter in the monochrome paintings of the late '60s and early '70s. Now he brushes over the measured spaces and denies their neatness, thus establishing visually his changing priorities. The figure is conspicuously absent from these paintings, yet in *Wrigley Building (Chicago)* of 1975, we sense an implicit human presence in the pure yellow cross placed at eye level. Oddly reinforcing this implied verticality is the schematic skyscraper set on its side and messed up with fast licks of green paint. In its dark blue ground streaked by brown, this painting produces dissonances and unexpected harmony.

Moskowitz finds new confidence by adapting strongly directional subjects to large formats. In four paintings since 1978, we see him reveling in the fact of

tall, skinny flatnesses. There is a faintly whimsical sense of grandeur in the way Moskowitz romanticizes urban structures in his monumental canvases. One is reminded of Albert Bierstadt's painting of the California redwoods. Without sacrificing the ambition of his scale and subject matter, Moskowitz gives his performances a light touch. When he paints the buttes of Monument Valley in a long, horizontal canvas called *The Mittens* (1980-81), he makes it an elegant, all-black panorama whose forms are so ambiguous they might be the tops of Gothic skyscrapers or the smokestacks on an oceanliner. By hanging the 39-by-144-inch painting close to the ground, he gives it the aspect of a dado, without, in fact, placing any other painting above it. He attempts a more embracing horizontality in *Big Picture* of 1979-80 (not in this exhibition, though shown in last year's Whitney Biennial); unfortunately this painting cannot quite support its own size, having only a tame amalgamation of beaming lights, painted gold frames, and empty black space with which to structure itself. Despite its implied reference to nocturnal landscape, *Big Picture* fails where *The Mittens* succeeds in creating an original sense of place.

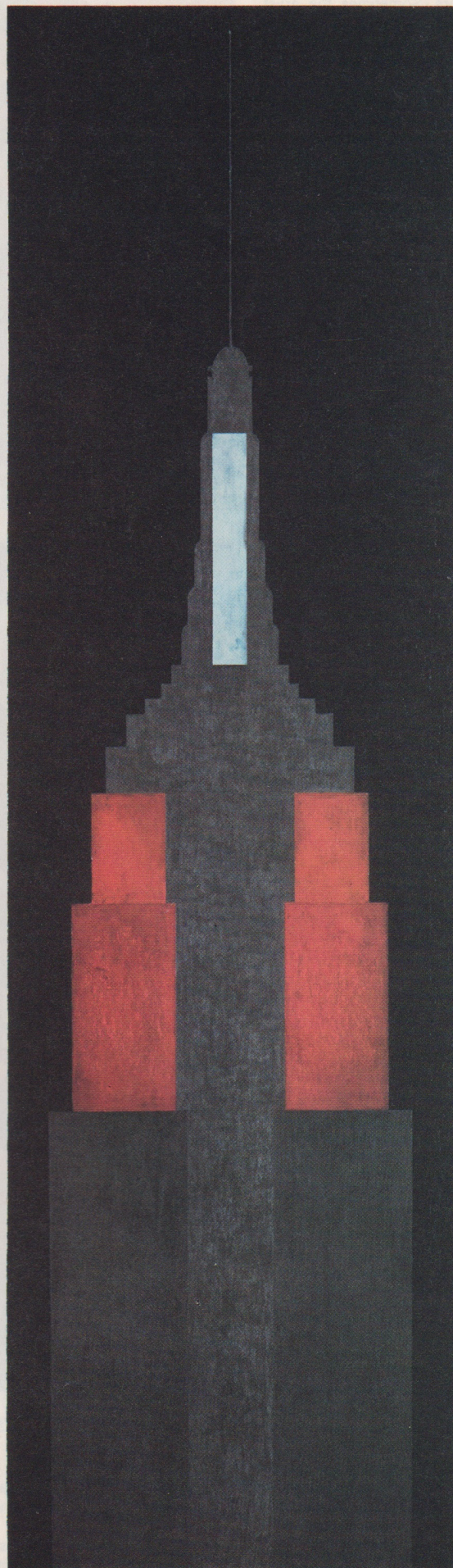
Drawings from 1980 confirm that Moskowitz is at his best working big, but not too big. The smaller works on paper serve as a coda to the drawings in the show, and were in fact executed after them. Only the two tall drawings of the Empire State Building have genuinely iconic presence. Spanning two sheets of paper, the larger drawing is the more august, and, unlike his rather glib diptych painting of the World Trade Center, it avoids making overly literal use of the split format. Instead, the two sheets build on each other to sustain the drawing's large size. There is a prodigious amount of labor evident in the graphite surfaces, which glow like burnished pewter. Pastel areas are alternately solid and dappled, encrusted and abraded, always luminous, never clotted. For all its virtuosity, the drawing comes across as selfless. The skyscraper is this artist's companion, his beacon, an article of urban faith. At 46, Robert Moskowitz is about the same age as the Empire State Building, and this drawing radiates with both its charisma and the increments of his self-knowledge.

—Brooks Adams

NEW YORK

Jeff Way at Pam Adler

Sometimes works of art have themes thrust upon them from without, by crit-



Robert Moskowitz: *Untitled (Empire State)*, 1980, pastel and graphite on paper, 106 by 31 1/4 inches, at the Hudson River Museum.