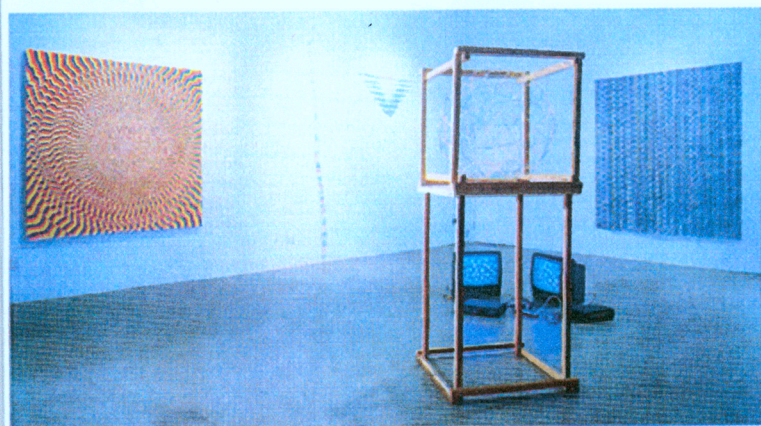


ART

Op 'til you drop

Two new shows put a whole new spin on Op Art

By Carol Kino



"Op at Up," installation view.

As movements go, Op Art has had a sadly checkered history. During its heyday in the early '60s, it was revered as a species of pure abstraction devoted to optical illusion. But by the end of the decade, Op Art had been so frequently employed as a faddy fashion motif that it had lost all credibility as serious art. And when such artists as Ross Bleckner and Philip Taaffe began appropriating elements of Op for their own ironic ends about 20 years later, they certainly didn't help its reputation. Now, however, a pair of terrific shows—one at MoMA, the other at Up & Co.—suggests that Op Art may be making a comeback.

The splashier of the two shows is the latest "Projects" offering at the Museum of Modern Art—an institution that played an important part in Op Art's history when, in 1965, it mounted "The Responsive Eye," the definitive Op survey. This time around, MoMA's curators have picked four young artists whose work, as cocurator Lillian Tone puts it, lifts "content into a contentless realm." Basically, this means that while everything here comes loaded with visual stimuli, the work also has—surprise, surprise—a *conceptual*

edge, which offers viewers an extra mind-bending dimension.

The show opens with Karin Davie's canvases, in which brightly colored stripes morph into vaguely humanoid shapes. Smudged with smears and drips, the overall result looks like a weird hybrid of Op Art and underground comix by way of Morris Louis. The next gallery holds Bruce Pearson's appealing relief paintings which resemble psychedelic posters. Covered with phrases like "ANOTHER NAIL IN THE COFFIN OF OBJECTIVITY," Pearson's pieces are carved from Styrofoam and painted in Day-Glo

colors. The words are almost indecipherable, but they seem to pulsate with subliminal meaning anyway.

Pearson's paintings make the perfect foil for Udomsak Krisanamis's more muted work, which hangs in the same room. Viewed from afar, these arrangements of ivory dots and lozenges on blue and black backgrounds resemble starry skies or Agnes Martin-like abstractions.

Upon closer inspection, however, each piece turns out to have been obsessively collaged. Like Pearson, Krisanamis incorporates words in his work; he starts out each piece by layering strips of newspaper onto canvas, then uses a Magic Marker to black out everything but the spaces within letters.

The final room is devoted to the excel-

lent Fred Tomaselli, who continues here his trademark practice of embedding pills and other controlled substances within thick layers of resin, so that they seem to vibrate and glow. Incredibly, even though Tomaselli uses pretty much the same craftsmanship and materials throughout, each piece has a completely different look and feel. In the phantasmagoric *Bird Blast*, for example, a colorful eruption of leaves and bird illustrations explodes from the work's center. In *9000 Beats Per Second*, which recalls the work of original Op Art master Bridget Riley, wavy stripes made of aspirin tablets

throb against an austere black void.

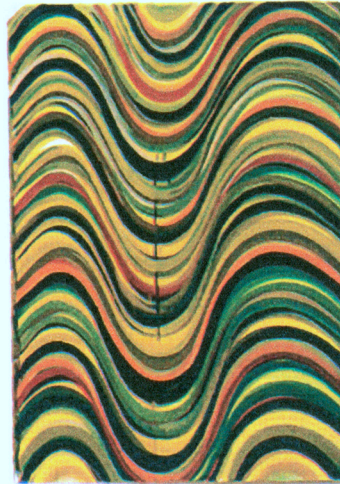
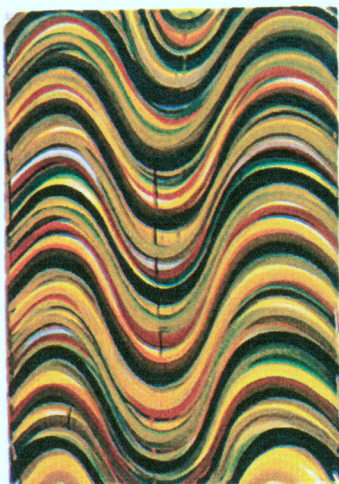
"Op at Up," meanwhile, is being held in a scruffy Tribeca space that couldn't be more different from MoMA's pristine environs. Most of the pieces use fairly minimal materials and are thumbtacked to the walls; as a result the whole show has the air of an elementary-school science fair. In contrast to the trippy sensibility on view at MoMA, the works here simply play with perception. But the longer you look at this stuff, the dizzier it makes you feel.

For work of sheer nausea-inducing potential, top prize has to go to Tom Moody, who also organized the show. Starting with a single basic component—a computer-generated stripe, minutely shaded with black Ben Day dots and photocopied at slightly different sizes—Moody pieces together a quilt that's crazy enough to make your head spin. Mark Dagley turns in another vertiginous performance with his painting of primary-colored dots in an out-of-sync spiral. And in Ray Rapp's two-monitor video installation, animated spheres advance and recede in a peculiarly jerky fashion.

The show's real standout, however, is Alicia Wirt, whose pieces made me think in new ways about painting. In her *7-Layered Light Shelf*, for instance, several triangular shelves cast ordinary shadows below, while reflecting colors above. Since they're installed above eye level, it's impossible to see how these objects were made. I was also fascinated by David Clarkson's mixed-media construction, in which blue dots, red lightbulbs and a blue mobile are suspended against a crimson background. Staring at it affords some very interesting afterimages once you finally look away.

In this day and age, reenvisioning a '60s movement minus irony or nostalgia—as the work in both of these shows so ably does—seems an unusually refreshing achievement. Still, we should all perhaps think twice before asking for more. Our eyes might not be able to take it.

"Projects 63" is at the Museum of Modern Art through June 30 (see Museums). "Op at Up" is at Up & Co. through July 18 (see Soho).

At MoMA: Karin Davie, *In Out, In Out 24 and 25*, 1994.