

Art in America
May 1989
Los Angeles
Ron Linden
at Ovsey

Ron Linden's new work is his most intriguing and captivating yet. For the last ten years or so, he has without much fuss pursued a semi-conceptual "non-style" in paintings, which now, in the form of collage and low relief, has at last found its footing. Nearly half of the 11 works in this exhibition, most of which are made of 1/4-inch-thick panels of wood about 4 feet wide, are explicitly political in subject. A particular context is thus established, so that even the most abstract of his paintings can hardly be seen as non-referential. It strikes me as nearly miraculous that Linden can express such a passionate social commitment - primarily to nationalist self-determination - in such exceedingly handsome (if somewhat understated) works.

In the past, Linden has developed a vocabulary of signature images which included schematically rendered items of furniture, books and draftsman's tools. Some of these appear in the new work, along with a more abstract shape, like a circle with a smooth bite taken out of it on opposite sides, that was suggested, according to the artist, by the form of an optical lens. The issue in these works is indeed centrality of focus. The overall shape of *Axle*, for example, is that of a notched disk, which contains at its center a black circle bisected vertically and horizontally as if to evoke the cross hairs in a gun sight. The same image reappears in the large, rectangular painting *Facade of Legitimization*, which also gives prominent place to the stenciled letters "N," "E," "V" and "R." Four other wooden paintings are shaped like the prototypical lens which sometimes, as in *Surous*, can also be reminiscent of a keyhole. The motif is repeated in the center of *Surous* in transparent green acrylic that despite the crispness of its edges, also suggests a stain. All of the shaped wooden panels are textured with striations of black paint combed across tile surface.

Floating within the central red circle of *Rally*, above the lens motif, is a phrase rendered in a foreign script which, the artist informs me is a Kurdish battle cry, "Kurdistan or Death."

Language is very much an issue in this work. Many of the paintings contain collaged fragments from English and Spanish language newspapers - words which for most of us are more familiar than the Kurdish phrases. The headline "?Quien Controla la Prensa?" is glued to the surface of a work of the same name, along with snippets of articles on media manipulation. A creamy, transparent, off-white film of paint here gives a visual glaze to the information without obscuring it. *Desafio*, meanwhile, is a large tondo covered with clippings, photos and

the masthead from *El Periodico Comunista Revolucionario*, along with duplicate material from its English language counterpart, *Challenge*. A T square, affixed to the collage's center by a wooden pin, suggests a movable radius which could be spun or positioned on the inequities spelled out by the headlines. *Desafio* is visually reminiscent of Carlo Carra's famous *Interventionist Manifesto* of 1914, except for the obvious difference in politics.

Linden's craftsmanship is remarkable. It's offhand, straight-forward (not gimmicky) and honest, while being fairly complex. The program, ambitious though it is, succeeds: every aspect of this work sensitively conveys the comparable dignity of humble materials and downtrodden human beings.

Frances Colpitt