

art

The lay of the land

*Three shows consider
our ever-changing
environment*

American Prints From the 1930's and 1940's, at the Kennedy Studios/Lyle Evan Gallery through November 28.

Edmund Sullivan: South Shore Paintings, at the Mills Gallery through November 28.

Nan Tull: New Paintings, at the Akin Gallery through November 25.

by Robin Hardman



PAINTED MATTER: "Billow," an oil on canvas by Nan Tull, is one of several works by the artist on display at the Akin Gallery through November 25.

Nan Tull uses impasto to a very different end in her richly abstract works at the Akin Gallery. Her large-scale paintings and drawings are built around single images of hot-quite-recognizable shapes. Giant organic forms, reminiscent of shells or leaves or vegetable matter, fill her canvases. In smaller works she plays with even vaguer, yet somehow familiar shapes: sort of heart-like, sort of kidney-like, sort of amoeba-like.

The shapes are not only organic in themselves, but in the way they seem to pulse against the background. In many cases, the color of the background is hardly different from that of the object. In "Hinge," for instance, it is hard to see where the orange form separates from its ground, and the resulting fluidity lends an extra layer of animation to the work.

In addition to her thickly painted, almost garishly colored canvases, Tull does some paintings in a smooth, untextured black and white. These never stand alone, but balance the color panels in some multiple-canvas works or, in one case, share a sharply divided canvas with a huge square of color. These works that employ both color and grisaille—a monochromatic style in shades of gray—are among the most interesting on view here. The smooth black and white mimics, in form, the highly textured color. It is the shadow counterpart of the colored parts. It is like a photograph: the cool, flat image of vibrant reality. It also serves as a step back for the viewer, a welcome breather from the kind of hot, heavy life force the artist celebrates in color.

When Tull uses charcoal and pastels to create her black and whites, a certain amount of texture returns. These drawings hang unconnected with any color work. They are close-up renderings of what are probably milkweed plants, and are the closest Tull comes to representational art in this exhibition. Even here we can barely make out the form of the plant. As in her paintings, the "feeling" of the organic takes

precedence over the actual depiction of living matter. We may not know exactly what we are looking at, but we know it is alive.