

Art: Roszak Evokes Spirit of Bauhaus

By HILTON KRAMER

ART history — even the art history of the present century — abounds in unexpected shifts and convergences. Impulses once believed to be at odds with each other are now, in a changed perspective, seen to be very much united in a common enterprise.

Take the use of machine forms, for example. Votaries of the Dada movement were said to employ them for the purposes of mockery. The vocabulary of industrialism was used to strike a blow against the ethos of industrialism. That was the theory, anyway. At the Bauhaus, on the other hand, the machine was piously upheld as a paradigm of Utopian harmony, the shining symbol — shining in every sense — of a longed-for integration of art, technology and a new social order.

Yet in our actual experience of machine-derived art, is there really that much difference? Removed from their ideological origins to the neutral world of the contemporary art gallery or museum, the forms of such art are now likely to strike us as remarkably similar. The satirist of industrialism had more in common with the Utopian acolyte than either supposed.

I am reminded of this paradox by the current exhibition of Theodore Roszak's "Constructions" at the Zabriskie Gallery, 29 West 57th Street (through tomorrow). Nowadays Mr. Roszak is better-known to us for the work he has been producing since the late 1940's — the Abstract Expressionist metal sculpture that, in both form and spirit, represents the very obverse of the machine esthetic. But earlier on in his long career — he was born in 1907 — he worked as a kind of Constructivist, and it is the art of this earlier period, 1932-1945, that is now being exhibited.

This is an art deeply indebted to the Bauhaus spirit, even though not — as it turns out — entirely bound by it. In the free-standing constructions especially, the smoothly painted surfaces, the primary colors, the simple shapes, the shiny metal parts (all articulated with a master tool-maker's precision and elegance), and the industrial "feel" of every form, all attest to the technological perfectionism of the Bauhaus idea.

Yet time has done something interesting to this work. It no longer looks as impersonal or as rationally conceived as it once did. The vertical pieces now have the appearance of crazy rockets about to be launched in space, and one is no longer certain whether to take them "straight" or as a sly and slightly comic turn on the scientific pretensions of the Bauhaus philosophy. In the historical perspective of the 1970's, they reveal an unexpected — and probably unintended — affinity with Dada's mockery of the machine esthetic.

In the wall constructions we are given a more explicit glimpse of the

element of irrationalist fantasy that was always an integral, but perhaps unacknowledged, part of Mr. Roszak's Constructivist style. Here, too, the forms are expertly articulated with the industrial "finish" we associate with Bauhaus practice. But they are unmistakably shaped by more disparate impulses. The influence of Miró, for example, is abundant, if restrained, and alerts us to something quite alien to the purist forms and colors of orthodox Constructivism.

When we then turn from these wall constructions, with their curious enclosures of Miróesque forms locked into geometrical space, to look again at the free-standing pieces, the very shapes of their brightly colored masses are now seen to derive from a free, less rationally conceived vein of fantasy than we at first supposed. The artist's subsequent move into the free-form improvisations of Abstract Expressionism no longer looks like the total break with the past it was once taken for.

These constructions have had an interesting exhibition history. Julian Levy first showed them in 1940, and in 1946 Dorothy Miller included them in the now historic "Fourteen Americans" show at the Museum of Modern Art. They were shown again in Mr. Roszak's 1956 retrospective at the Whitney, and then packed away. They will, of course, be new to most people seeing them today. My guess is that they are on their way to having a permanent place in the history of American sculpture.

Other exhibitions this week include: Robert Natkin (Emmerich, 41 East 57th Street): Color-field painting tends to be intolerant of complication, preferring to make its impact through inflated simplicities of form. Robert Natkin is, more often than not, content to abide by this practice, and he has the requisite gifts — for color, and for covering a canvas with a gorgeous, eye-pleasing surface — that painting of this persuasion requires.

Yet there is also evident in his work a yearning for something a little more complex, a little richer and more adventurous and less pat, than the Color-field style usually allows. He apparently locates this "other tradition" in the painting of two European masters — Bonnard and Klee — and offers gentle reminders of their work in his own. He never taxes the viewer with energetic evocations of their styles; he only hints, teases and whispers, so to speak, confiding his envy and admiration of their accomplishments. His own painting thus remains firmly locked into the safe conventions of the Color-field esthetic, filling the eye with something very nice but not very robust to look at, while at the same time apprising us of his appreciation (or nostalgia, perhaps?) for something deeper. (Through Wednesday.)