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A STUDY IN CONTRAST IN PARIS—Pal Gerszon's "Family," 1962, at left, and Helen Frankenthaler's "Storm," 1963, at right.

Current Paris Biennale Bigger and Most Exciting to Date

By John Ashbery

PARIS, Oct. 15.—It used to be that an opera house was the customary status symbol for a city. Tehran has one that has never been used, and there are quite a few throughout the world whose rafters have rarely resounded to the sound of opera. But times are changing. In order to get itself put on the cultural map today, any self-respecting city must have its biennale.

It all began at the turn of the century with the Venice Biennale, the oldest and best known of them all. Now there are biennales everywhere. Tehran has one of course. So do Sao Paulo, Pittsburgh, Mexico City, Tokyo, Antwerp and Ljubljana, Yugoslavia. Milan has a triennale. Paris has a machine-tool biennale and, since 1959, an art biennale, which is now on at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

The first Paris biennale was a mess. The one two years ago was livelier but unwieldy. This year's is even bigger and it is the most exciting to date, if you overlook the dead wood that is an inevitable feature of any exhibition this large, owing to the small percentage of artistic geniuses to be found in the world's population at any given time.

It is limited to artists aged 35 and under, and as an indication of what the younger set is up to these days, it puts last year's Venice Biennale in the shade.

Sprawling, Confusing

What emerges from this sprawling, confusing picture of current avant-garde trends? For one thing, many of the artists reaffirm the idea that art has something to do with enjoyment.

In fact, the exhibition often seems on the verge of turning into Coney Island. There is a constructivist fun-house in the French section, with a maze of mirrors that is straight out of Orson Welles's "The Lady from Shanghai." The Lettrist section includes an aquarium with fish constituting a "live mobile" and a mechanical clown labeled "The Anti-Lettrist Critic."

But there is more to it than that. After the tons of sludge which clogged the last two shows, there is a new preoccupation with color, with ideas and with recognizable forms. This is especially true of

the lively British contingent, made up mostly of young pop artists.

Peter Blake, who has more space than the others, works in several styles. His beatnik self-portrait reminds me less of pop art than of American socialist-realist painting of the '30s. "Love Wall," a large panel covered with pin-ups, suggests a tidied-up Rauschenberg.

More personal are a portrait of a middle-aged couple in a commercial art technique and one of a treader whose costume is stitched with real yarn. There are those who will feel that Blake is handing them a yarn in other pictures as well, but his work is bright and odd, and—an important new avant-garde development—it isn't boring.

Ring Changes

Besides him, David Hockney, Allen Jones and Derek Boshier ring abstract changes on the pop theme; the results owe more than a little to Larry Rivers. Peter Phillips rearranges mass media (cigarette ads and TV screens) in dramatic and sometimes terrifying compositions.

I have a special fondness for the undulating pastel-painted sculptures of Philip King. If there are public playgrounds on Mars they probably contain objects resembling Mr. King's sculptures, which are very much his own invention.

Other interesting entries from the English-speaking world are the fresh-looking abstractions of Edmund Alleyn, Gray Mills and Glenn Toppings (Canada); a snappy black-and-white composition by Nelson Kenny (New Zealand), and the sober wood-and-iron constructions of Irish sculptor Ian Stuart.

There is certainly no lack of exciting art in the United States today, but the ten sculptors from Berkeley, Calif., who represent our country make a curiously tentative impression. Much of their work looks like the European imitations of American art which abound in other rooms of the Biennale.

Victor Royer uses old machine parts à la Stankiewicz; Frederick Sauls twists sheet metal in the manner of John Chamberlain. The least influenced of the group is James Melchert, whose "Door F," an uncomprising oblong with non-functional drain pipe attached, has a sour individuality.

There are some surprises from the Communist countries. Usually the only modern-looking work comes from Poland, but this year

Hungary is also tinged with a certain modernism.

Pal Gerszon's neo-Cubist paintings, especially his nimble, Légerish "Workers," are ingratiating and constitute a great leap forward; Laszlo Balogh is preoccupied with abstract patterns in his pleasant, dove-colored "Courtyard in Szentendre."

Mild Thaw

There are signs of a mild thaw even in Romania, usually the most conservative of the satellite states; Ion Georghiu has apparently been told to jazz things up in his Modigliani-influenced "Nude" and in "Industrial Landscape."

The Russians emerge this year as the greatest pop artists of them all. Gouram Guelovani's portrait of Lenin would not look out of place hanging in the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. Tatiana Golembievskaja must have been looking at pop art before she painted her corny picture of Ukrainian peasant girls euphorically handling pottery in a ceramics shop; otherwise I refuse to believe that she was born in 1936 as the catalogue says.

Also present is Tair Salakhov,

who paints with distinction in an undramatic, realist style akin to that of Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth. The Russians apparently think his "Convoy" is one of their most important modern paintings since they put it in another show here two years ago, and it is a good picture. So is his cool, classic portrait of the musician Karakae.

I wish there were time to discuss in detail the prize-winning ink drawings of American Gregory Masurovsky, the strong realist sculpture of Holland's Arthur Spronken, another prize-winner; the handsome red-and-gold abstraction of Japan's Aiko Miyawaki and the strangely poetic floral abstractions of his compatriot Tsugutoshi Uemura, or the dreamlike "Métro" of Niki de St. Phalle, Gilles Aillaud's painting of a highway at night, and the work of Moroccan abstractionist Mohamed Amar, Venezuelan action painter Francisco Hung and Swiss pop painter Peter Staempfli. Together with many of their colleagues, they offer abundant proof that the artists of the rising generation are, like their predecessors, managing to figure things out for themselves.

American Helen Frankenthaler won a prize in the first Paris Biennale, and the paintings she exhibited there were almost its sole redeeming feature. Now Miss Frankenthaler is having her second one-man show in Paris at the Galerie Lawrence.

She is one of America's most original and satisfying contemporary artists. Coming after the first wave of American abstract expressionism, she has roots in Pollock, Kline and De Kooning, but her work is exquisitely personal as well as strong and tonic. The new paintings are perhaps denser and more architectural than those of the last show, and they announce a bright new stage of her career.

The unsized canvas still gives a mat surface for the briskly meandering areas of pastel color. The effect is, as always, both intimate and violent. Looking at Miss Frankenthaler's work one has the impression of being in the presence of a complete personality, with all the dark depths and sunlit heights that this word implies. It is a stunning and stimulating performance. (13 Rue de Seine; to Oct. 31).