

## Exhibitions

*At the Ackland*  
*Summer 1996*  
*No 48*

Rick Prol, American, b. 1957:  
*No Exit*, 1985; acrylic on  
 canvas. Gift of Hanford Yang.

*No Exit* is typical of Prol's  
 mid-1980s work—a scene of  
 violence in an urban hell.



# Springing Steel and Ugly Paint

*Recent Gifts Highlight Contemporary Display*

*Opening June 2*

**T**his summer the Museum will put on *Between Form and Image: Art of the 1970s and 80s*. The group of contemporary paintings, drawings and sculpture from the last thirty years has come from a variety of sources—purchase, gift and loan—but the inspiration for the show is a recent gift from Hanford Yang, a New York architect and a major collector of contemporary art. The eight works in this gift have significantly enriched the Museum's holdings of art from the last thirty years.

James Wolfe's *Sawyer* (pictured on the cover) and Rick Prol's *No Exit* (above) exemplify the range of Mr. Yang's gift. Dating from 1974, *Sawyer* is in the mainstream of abstract, welded-steel sculpture pioneered by artists like David Smith and Anthony Caro. Like a Cubist painting, it lets us look at a three-dimensional object from several points of view at once: inside and outside, back and front. For Wolfe, the air is a blank sheet of paper on which he can draw in three dimensions. But although the steel strips in *Sawyer* create an object (over eight feet high) that is mostly empty space, they themselves are solidly material. The title

suggests their resemblance to the thin, flexible strips of wood left over from trimming boards in a sawmill. In a seemingly casual way one leans upon another, and that one on a third, until suddenly a central group of shapes is suspended in mid-air. *Sawyer* does not look like a living thing, but it does have the quality of life, the springy look of a growing sapling. Like a sapling, too, it combines apparently haphazard growth with an overall harmonious balance.

Rick Prol, thirteen years younger than Wolfe, belongs to a different artistic generation, with a very different artistic outlook. When he painted *No Exit* in 1985 he was emerging as a leader of the East Village art scene in New York, and it is typical of his painting from that time: a scene of violence in an urban hell where dysfunctional plumbing and a knife through the neck are equally commonplace. Prol depicts the struggles and sufferings of his characters (one reviewer has christened them "Prol-etarians") in a deliberately outrageous style; where Wolfe is expanding a respected tradition of abstract sculpture, Prol is mocking the tradition of Expressionist painting even as he borrows from it. His exaggerations have less to

do with such "old masters" as the early twentieth-century German Expressionists than with the clown faces of "genuine oil painting" kitsch, or the adolescent shockery of underground comics, or what passed for modernism in the commercial art of the 1950s—a mixture of Surrealism and Expressionism that had filtered into the design of "avant-garde" stage sets and paperback book covers.

According to conventional wisdom the aim of art is to create beauty, but there have always been two very good reasons for making it ugly: to frighten people or to make them laugh. *No Exit* occupies a precarious territory between humor and horror. Should we register the clown face and Halloween colors, or note the blasphemous "Pietà" composition, and remember that *No Exit* is also the title of Jean-Paul Sartre's play about hell? Prol seems to have wanted it both ways in this picture, and to a surprising extent he has been able to get it.

The exhibition, which also includes works by Adolph Gottlieb, Anthony Caro, H.C. Westermann and others, will be on view June 2 through July 28. ☼