effort to keep his most important paintings in his native Spain. The ‘American’ Sorolla is an artist of Spanish landscapes and beach scenes with a few genre paintings and a hefty dose of effective society portraits, as well as a few Spanish portraits acquired or commissioned by Archer M. Huntington, founder of the Hispanic Society and Sorolla’s greatest patron. These portraits make sure that the ‘American’ Sorolla comes off as a portrait painter who was consistently more important than his rival Zorn and as good as his friend Sargent.

For this reviewer, the most startling and memorable painting in the exhibition is Christopher Columbus leaving Palos, Spain, painted in Granada in 1910 for his other American patron, Thomas Fortune Ryan (Fig.82). After making nine oil studies for the composition (all in the exhibition), Sorolla painted a life-size Columbus standing alone on shipboard with a billowing sail behind him. Palos was the port of first of his four voyages across the Atlantic, but, at forty-one, Columbus was already middle-aged and white-haired. Far from the confident, vital youth of lore, his Columbus is wiser, older and curiously more confident than the youth so often represented in American history paintings. One of the greatest ‘American’ history paintings, it languishes today in the Marinen’s Museum in Newport News, Virginia, and is, for that reason alone, absent from the American national canon of painted images.

The Meadows is to be congratulated for this beautiful exhibition that functions as a groundbreaking study of taste and patronage in Gilded Age America. Yet, as the catalogues for both the Madrid and the Dallas exhibitions make clear, the real frontier in Sorolla studies is his drawings and landscape paintings. On the evidence of the few drawings exhibited and reproduced in the catalogue, and in the knowledge that more than two thousand Sorolla drawings survive, there is a clear need for an exhibition devoted solely to them.

Robert Indiana

New York and San Antonio

by DAVID ANFAM

SIGNs HAVE PLAYED a large role in the panoply of American culture. For a start, from Plymouth Rock onwards the Puritan mind thought in terms of biblical typology, where-by the things of this world shadowed forth divine or metaphysical import. Consequently, in their eyes material reality for better or worse became an emblem, a signifier of other, spiritual realms. By the nineteenth century, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel The Scarlet Letter (1850) offered the locus classicus for this persuasion — now crucially turned self-conscious — with its leitmotif of the letter ‘A’ standing as a mercurial cipher for alternately dark or redemptive moral forces in the American character. Finally, in the modern period the flood gates of the United States’ obsession with signification per se were flung wide open. The result has been a veritable deluge of sign-making across the various arts, ranging from — to cite some of the most notable instances almost at random — William Carlos Williams’s Imagist poem ‘The Great Figure’ (1921) and the Charles Demuth painting that it inspired, The figure in gold (1928), to the kind of linguistic sign around which the entire plot of a film such as Orson Welles’s Citizen Kane (1941) pivoted: the spoken word ‘Rosebud’. The compelling exhibition Robert Indiana: Beyond LOWE, seen by this reviewer at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (closed 5th January), and now at the McNay Museum, San Antonio (to 25th May), reveals its eighty-five-year old subject as a clear inheritor of this ‘semiotic’ urge, a self-confessed American painter of signs. It also positions Indiana’s achievement as arguably the most aesthetically and emotionally rewarding of any figure associated with Pop art (notwithstanding the fact that he disowns the label).

As installed on a single floor at the Whitney, Indiana’s retrospective was bursting with energy both visual and intellectual. The ensemble, arrayed in a free-flowing manner without any fully enclosed spaces/galleries, felt crowded and, strangely, much the better for it. Contemplating the show, Indiana self-deprecatingly remarked: ‘I can’t believe I did all this work. I should be exhausted, and I am exhausted’. Indeed, on this score, in its single-mindedness and fertile repetitiveness Indiana’s œuvre evinces another down-home American quality, namely, the urge to create accumulative lists, iterations or catalogues that is found in writers and artists as otherwise diverse as, say, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Thomas Pynchon, Alfred Jensen, Sol LeWitt and, at a quotidian level, the myriad crafters of that singular genre, the American quilt.1 In this sense, the unity of Indiana’s vision has a certain manic or obsessive drive, as though if something is worth saying once, it were worth repeating over and again (to recall Mark Rothko’s stated credo). Literally configured as the symmetries and self-propagating sequences that are typical of Indiana’s pictorial methods, this dynamic lends the erstwhile brilliance of his images a sinister edge. Put another way, at times it feels as though the paintings are a visual discourse that brooks no opposition, let alone a dialogue with the beholder. They tread a vertiginous line between the impersonal and the private, at once revealing and concealing their creator’s mixed personal fortunes.

EXHIBITIONS

82. Christopher Columbus leaving Palos, Spain, by Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida. 1910. Canvas, 112.4 by 162.2 cm. (Mariners’ Museum, Newport News; exh. Meadows Museum, Dallas).
Robert Clark (he changed his name in 1958) executed several disconcerting images of dusky heads, one of them studded with nails, upon which are inscribed the fateful words ‘Mene, mene, tekel’ (nos.17 and 18). Already the writing was on the wall for the future American Dream. Subsequently, Indiana turned to assembling rough wooden herms, as rigid and phallic as their ancient Greek predecessors, yet also morbid in their allusions to tombstones and the Crucifixion. Nevertheless, a counter-truth filled out his vision. In short, while living on Coenties Slip in lower Manhattan, Indiana experienced an epiphany in the form of his neighbour Ellsworth Kelly’s hard-edge abstraction. The oxymorons were in place for everything that lay ahead in Indiana’s maturity. Henceforth gaity and gloom, abstraction and empathy, coexisted in his stark kaleidoscopes. As with a wheel of fortune or a pinball machine, the viewer takes their luck as to what will come up—trumps zero or the bull’s eye, success or death—while Indiana apparently himself takes no sides.

The conflict at the core of Indiana’s art that leads to its unblinking two-sidedness seems to stem from a merger of difficult personal experiences with inexorable historical and cultural circumstances. On the one hand, Indiana was born out of wedlock, moved twenty-one times before he was seventeen, once told an interviewer, ‘I never had a home’ and recalled how ‘it seemed that half my life was spent in the automobile’. As Indiana’s father lost his job at an oil company due to the Depression and fell on hard times, so his mother’s last words to him before she died were: ‘Have you had enough to eat?’. His sexuality also made him an outsider in the climate of Cold War America. Consequently, art became for Indiana an escape route from the ‘bleak, cheap and tawdry life’ of his adoptive parents.

On the other hand, such misfortunes as Indiana encountered speak in macrocosm for larger truths in American society and capitalism. Faced with a seemingly endless wilderness, the American people have populated it with the shorthand for their relentless industry and pursuit of profit or happiness. Whether it be Taylormania, Fordism, IBM’s computational devices, the advertising slogan, the corporate logo, the roadside billboard or the neon of Broadway and Las Vegas, this is the hard, summary surface of Yankee culture, a ubiquitous façade ‘with no more personality than a paper cup’ – as Raymond Chandler memorably encapsulated the capital Indianapolis is famously denigrated as ‘Indiana an escape route from the ‘bleak, cheap and tawdry life’ of his adoptive parents.

83. The confederacy: Alabama and Robert Indiana. 1965; Canvas, 177.8 by 121.4 cm. (Miami University Art Museum, Oxford OH; exh. McNay Museum, San Antonio).

Here is the life’s work of an orphan from the godforsaken heartland who rocketed to global fame in 1966 with his painting LOVE (cat. no.108; Fig.84), then twelve years later retreated permanently to the remoteness of Vinalhaven Island, Maine, bitterly disheartened by the untoward notoriety that his by then all-too-signature (and sadly un-copyrighted) composition had dumped on him. That it has taken this long for a New York museum to give Indiana the recognition he deserves reflects both his intransigence and the fickleness of passing artistic fashions. In particular, although Indiana is an open homosexual, his work has never articulated this stance in terms of flamboyance or camp – unlike the effects of Warhol and other gay or bisexual Pop artists. Consequently its astringency lacks their fancy-footwork, aspiring to communicate, Indiana’s art stands as a dazzling paean to his country’s paradoxes.