

A·R·T

Stompin' At the Savoy

By Laura Holland

Savoy: By Richard Yarde, at Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, through Aug. 15. [Exhibition goes on tour to San Diego Museum of Art (Nov.-Dec., 82), the Baltimore Museum of Art (Feb.-March, 83), Studio Museum in Harlem (Apr.-June, 83), and the Museum of the National Center for Afro-American Artists in Boston (summer, 83).]

In *Savoy*, Richard Yarde logically extends his painterly interests—in terms of subject matter and stylistic approach—into sculptural installation. Yarde has moved from images of Black athletes, preachers and musicians to a large-scale re-creation of the Savoy Ballroom; he has turned from a combination of portraiture and patterning in paint to flattened cut-out form in sculpture.

Savoy was envisioned as a tribute to the Savoy Ballroom of Harlem, and to the optimistic vitality of the Harlem Renaissance, as epitomized by the Savoy. The dance floor of the Savoy stretched the length of a city block, but its cultural impact stretched even further. Dances such as the Big Apple, the Black Bottom, and the Shag were—reputedly—inspired by the elegant



setting and swinging sounds of the Savoy, and the Ballroom in turn inspired popular dance tunes such as "Stompin' at the Savoy."

Yarde has reduced the block-long Ballroom into a 60 by 24 foot installation populated by 15 couples who swing and sway and swoop their way across the floor. A 12-piece band, plus singer, is lined up hieratically under an elaborately patterned black-and-white canopy. Three sides are enclosed by mirrored walls and venetian blinds, with the fourth side defined by thick

silver columns. A wonderfully patterned carpet with arcs of red and blue runs around the dance floor and sets it off at the same time it draws the viewer—part way—into the sculpture's space. The figures are under life-size, which makes us more able to accept their stylizations as reality and also helps set them apart as inhabitants of a different era. Set up like a stage, the installation becomes a *tableau* (It is not exactly a *tableau vivant*, but it is composed of very lively figures caught for a moment out of time.)

The dancing figures are paintings turned sculpture. They are painted on canvas, which was first laminated onto thick pieces of polyurethane foam and then cut out in silhouette. Yarde designed a complex arrangement of dancing couples and painted its separate components with the same verve he displays on more traditionally sized and shaped canvases. Through the paint, the figures come alive. When seen from the side or the rear, the unadorned cut-out forms can look clunky. But the color and pattern

See Art Page 18

an extended saxophone solo. Yarde has used blue tones to represent all the faces perhaps to convey the effect of the ballroom's artificial lighting. From face to face, from figure to figure, it is consistent and convincing. It becomes confusing only because the entire installation is not infused with similar lighting effects. And it is highly effective in presenting the dancers as existing in a world of their own, be it ecstatic or nostalgic.)

The painterly sculpture falters, however, with the dancing couples. In the couples composed of widely separated figures, the rhythmic connection between dancers breaks down and the long gestural sweep that effectively unites the large sculpture is momentarily interrupted. The dancers who are merged into a single unit also strike a disparate note in the overall rhythm. The thick, white sides of each cut-out form become proportionally larger, and proportionally more distracting. The couples who are physically separated but gesturally united are the most successful, as individual units and as integral parts of the whole sculpture. The partners balance and extend each other's frozen movements elegantly and exuberantly.

Yarde presents the figures through masterfully flattened design, combining the patterns in clothes—stripes, plaids, prints—with patterns created by light and shadow on three-dimensional form. As Yarde does it, this technique is decorative and figurative. (My favorite figure is the man in the right foreground, in a light-brown, striped suit. The abstract design of the stripes is formally beautiful, yet the stripes are full of information implying the well-fleshed form of the body underneath.)

It's a strong tribute to Yarde's skill as a painter that he can carry off the illusion, that he knows which details of clothing and gesture are most telling, that he can create such expressive characters on the cut-out forms. Ironically, his real skill in painting pinpoints the problem in the installation plan. The all-too-visible *unpainted* surfaces interrupt the illusion that the painted surfaces work so hard to achieve. Perhaps the best way to look at *Savoy*—and certainly it's in the spirit of the ballroom—is to keep moving around it.

A·R·T

(Continued from Page 16)

of the paint successfully create the illusion of a floorful of freewheeling dancers.

Yarde's cut-out technique works unambiguously well on the primarily two-dimensional forms of the band members, ranged in a solid row. Within this phalanx, a strong visual rhythm weaves its way through the stylized shapes of the instruments, the repeated pattern of the stage lights, the musicians' black jackets and blue faces.

(This blue is not the near asphyxiation of