

## Art

**PAUL LAMANTIA** (Zaks, 620 N. Michigan Av.): The most recent works in this show of new paintings and drawings represent a radical departure from the sprawling stylizations that the artist always has used to communicate psychological menace. Their tendency is much more lean and literal, and if the leanness can be traced through the artist's paintings of the last few years, the literalness cannot.

LaMantia's subject remains the *femme fatale*. It has, of course, a venerable history that goes back to the early decades of the last century. The seed is found in Keats' poem, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and it blossoms like a malodorous flower by the time of the Symbolists.

Still, the most virulent 19th-Century treatments have faded beside LaMantia's updates, for his fatal women have been flayed, corsetted creatures who barely were human at all. They did not tempt as much as destroy, and it was done with a relish evident even when they seemed at rest.

Most of the works on view recall this ferocious atmosphere through the sinuous, tentacular style that spreads each predator across the surface and presses it close to

the picture plane. These pictures continue to be the hardest to read in terms of what is "going on," but here one finds a softening. There is a greater sense of painting for its own sake, recalling Francis Bacon's desire to render the most harrowing subjects with the lusciousness of a Claude Monet.

**BY COMPARISON**, the newest works are austere. Their forms are body parts that give the viewer more breathing room. This has been achieved by a diagonal that plunges into illusionistic space. A shelf or partition is suggested, with incidents occurring above and below.

At times one is reminded of the bizarre 1960s sculpture that had women dressed in sadomasochistic garb and used as the bases of tables. But there are more current referents, such as "Sisters," the Brian DePalma horror film about Siamese twins. Thus, an element of theater has been introduced. It easily can get out of hand, but here it is unusually powerful, resulting in some of the best paintings the artist has done. (Through April 25.)

Alan G. Artner



One Paul LaMantia treatment of the menacing *femme fatale* is "Whisper," a 1980 oil.