Crown Point Press
Newsletter
Winter 1998

Overview

Robert Colescott
at Crown Point Press

Robert Colescott is standing in the Crown Point Press studio in front of an almost-finished ambitious four-panel etching, answering questions from a small group of visitors. "It's really about our sex life," he confides. "Sex and race, those are my raw materials. That's why they're in the paint pots. But I'm making fun of myself, too, because I can't seem to get unhooked from those issues."

Beneath stars in a dark blue sky, a hand points a gun at the paint pot labeled "sex." A nude woman with a big mouth rolls her eyes. Two men talk, secretively it seems, since they are partly hidden in a dark swirling swath that races across the picture. Also caught in its energetic surface are a big face and a big bra. "It's got to be funny; otherwise it's just a big bra," Colescott says matter-of-factly.

There is another paint bucket, this one labeled "race;" a hamburger; another hand with a gun, this one pulling the trigger. The pink bra reappears, this time on a smiling, dancing lady moving fast in the direction of a distant house with a light in the window and a star overhead. There are two Aladdin's lamps with surprised-looking genies coming out of them. "Is this a narrative?" one of the visitors asks.

"It's allusive," replies the artist. "Not a description that's complete in itself. In a way, it's biographical. And there's some self-parody here."

"You go out there, and you're assaulted by stories," puts in Colescott's partner, Jandava Cattron.

Colescott shakes his head in agreement. "Life is a continuous reel," he muses. "You can plug in at certain points, see a little bit of it played out, then come in, even inventing your own part."

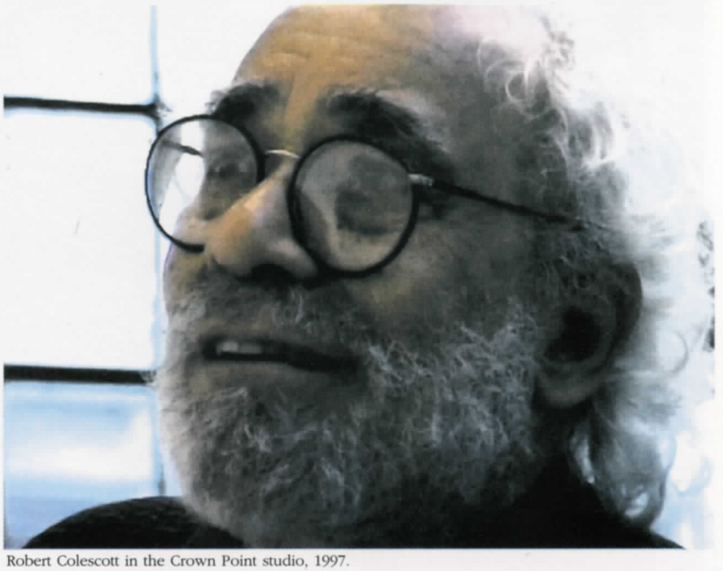
"The lamps speak of unlimited potential," Jandava says.

"Yes," Colescott responds, "But you'd better be careful what you wish. You might get it."

Colescott called his print *Pontchartrain*, the name of a grand lake bordering New Orleans. He is 72 this year, born in Oakland, California, and though he never lived in New Orleans, it figures in his biographical material as the birthplace of his parents and grandparents, and the site of many of his father's stories. Along the Pontchartrain shore, Colescott explains, were speakeasies, duck blinds, and ramshackle houses. His father played a jazz concert at a picnic there with the young Louis Armstrong, and the concert continued all the way back to New Orleans. On the boat, the musicians were under threat of having their instruments thrown into the water if they stopped playing "Steamboat Bill." "I always thought it was just one of my father's stories," Colescott told us. "But later I spoke to Louis Armstrong at one of his concerts, and he remembered my father and that infamous picnic."

Both Colescott's mother and father were musicians, she played piano, he violin and drums. The family ended up in Oakland because the Southern Pacific railroad had its commissary there; the senior Colescott spent most of his life working as a porter on that line. Oakland wasn't a bad place to grow up, though Colescott reflects that he felt isolated because the family had settled in a neighborhood that later adopted a covenant to be for whites only. "Having a car was extremely important, because we could go where our friends and relatives were. We depended on those relationships a great deal." At the age of thirteen, Colescott watched Diego Rivera working on a mural at the 1938 International Exposition on Treasure Island. One of his father's fellow black workers on the railroad, Sargent Johnson, became a well-known sculptor. He was a family friend who set an example in living a life committed to art.

When World War II came along, Colescott enlisted, and was sent to France. He returned to study at the University of California at Berkeley on the G. I. Bill. He began by studying languages and political science, aiming for a job in the foreign service, but a professor of his told him that, realistically, because of his race he should not expect to land such a job. So he switched his focus to art. He had been drawing since he was a child, but had thought art a risky profession; when he realized *everything* was risky, he decided to go for what he loved best. In 1949 he accomplished his goal of returning to France, where he studied for a year with Fernand Leger and immersed himself in the great museums of Paris. Though Colescott's paintings at Berkeley, like those of his teachers, had been abstract, Leger insisted on figuration. "He thought abstract art didn't communicate with people. He plugged the necessity of a narrative," Colescott says. After returning to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1950, Colescott became aware of Bay Area Figurative painting, developing then, and Funk Art, which came along a little later.



Robert Colescott in the Crown Point studio, 1997.

Abstract Expressionism had gone by, hardly noticed by him. But the idea of self-expression stuck.

"I wanted to solve the problems of paint," he says. "I kept trying to learn how to use my brush with some sense of strength and energy and personality, and so I painted all kinds of things: I painted figures, I painted still lifes, I painted flowers, I painted landscapes. I just painted everything." In 1953, two years after completing an M. A. at the University of California at Berkeley, he got a job teaching art in a junior high school in Seattle, and in 1957 moved to Portland to teach at Portland State University. During this time, he says, "I accepted the fact that I taught, but I wouldn't accept the fact of being a teacher." He was an artist first, and in 1964 accepted an invitation to be artist-in-residence at the American Research Center in Cairo, Egypt. This was a turning point in his work.

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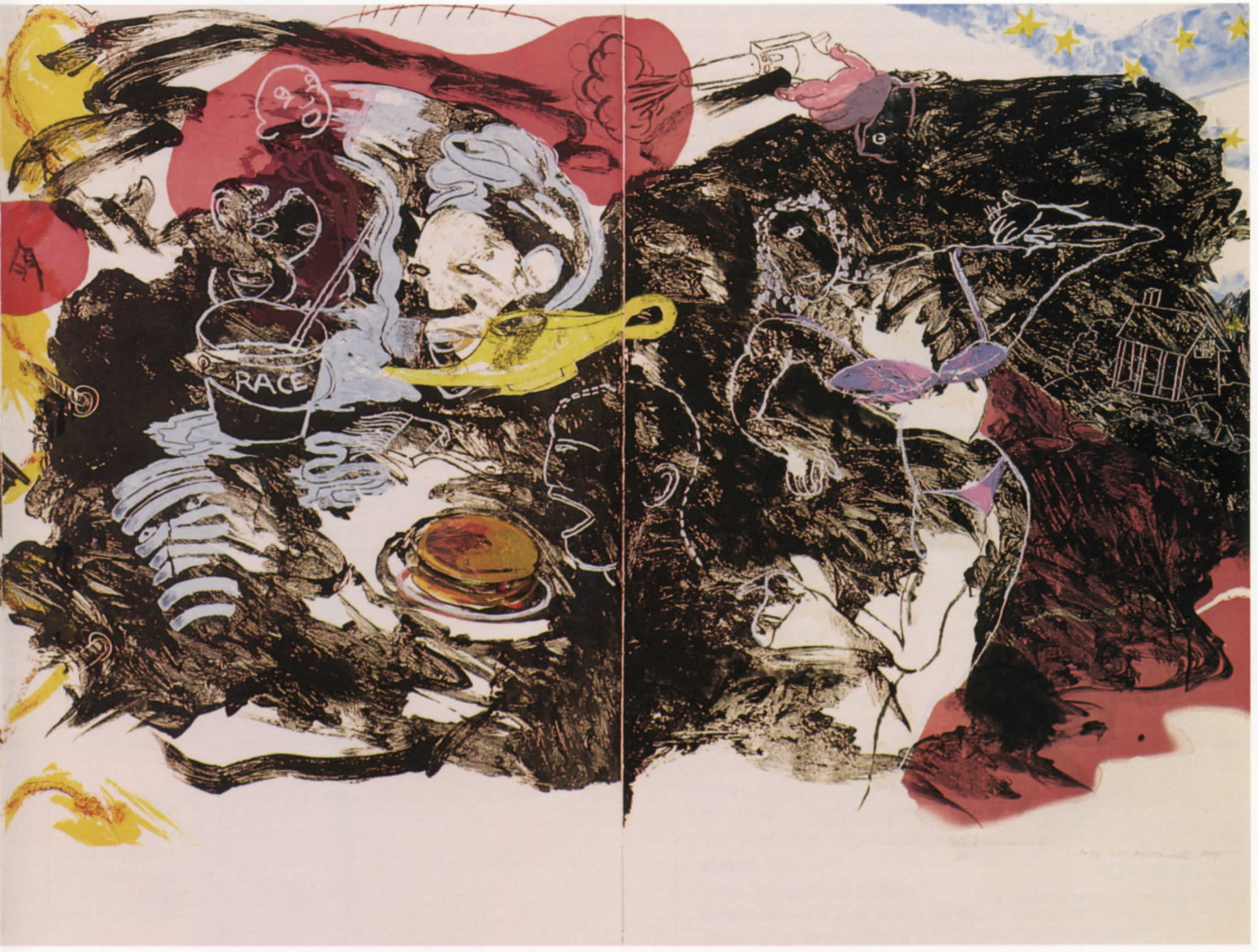
Robert Colescott, *Pontchartrain*, 1997. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with aquatint, soft ground etching and drypoint, printed on four sheets of paper.
Paper size: overall 46¼ x 117"; image size: overall 41 x 117". Edition 20. Printed by Dena Schuckit.


RACE

continued from front page

First, there was the culture. "Walking down the street in Cairo was to be walking among people like myself. Everybody—the president of the country and on down—was a person of color." Then, there was the art. "I came into contact with the narrative form because Egyptian art had a strong narrative sense to it; it was really important to tell a story. And the sense of monumentality that Leger kept trying to poke at me was so well-illustrated in Egyptian sculpture and architecture that it kind of put the pieces together." The appointment ended after one year, but Colescott stayed in Egypt, teaching at the American University there. The Six-Day War in 1967 forced him to leave. He went to Paris.

He eked out a living in Paris for three years by teaching American students studying abroad, then returned to Northern California in 1970 to become Professor of Art at California State College, Stanislaus. His painting had begun to take on its mature form, dealing with race and sex. It could have been connected with Pop Art if it had been more detached, but Colescott likes a painting surface that, as he says, "squirms." Though his touch is light toward his loaded subject-matter, his paintings have a passionate feel that didn't square with Pop philosophy. Like the Pop artists, however, his love of cartoons played a part in his approach. Speaking of his youth, he says, "I drew Toots and Caspar and the Katzenjammers a lot," and he adds that he also spent many Saturdays at the movies watching Westerns, in which "men were men and women were women." Stereotypes were a natural raw material for his art.

And in his own experience, stereotypes abounded. He found that painting a big buxom blonde was in itself a joke, all the more if he gave her a black face. If he showed her being ogled or fondled by a black man if her face was white, or a white man if her face was black, the joke paled, but he went ahead anyhow. He realized that Mickey Mouse is black, and painted him saying "Hi black folks!" Colescott explains that "especially in earlier cartoons, many characters were little minstrel faces. The faces, the kind of humor, and the kind of activities, were very much in the minstrel mode." Then, in 1975, he painted a whole boat-full of minstrels, Aunt Jemimas, and "happy darkies" and put at the helm George Washington Carver, the American botanist and former slave. *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* got some press attention when it was exhibited at the Whitney Museum in 1978 in a show titled "Art about Art." *I Gets a Thrill Too When I sees De Koo*, painted in 1978 and showing a recognizable copy of one of Willem de Kooning's celebrated *Women* with added blackface and bandanna, also got noticed.

The Whitney's "Art about Art" show included a motley group—even Rembrandt, Mondrian, and Picasso—but it focused on the Pop artists. At that time, Minimal and Conceptual artists were dominating the cutting-edge of the art world. Though not in the show, these artists were concerned with theoretical issues of art's place in history and culture, and were often accused of alienating the general public in favor of art about art. Their investigations eventually engendered what is known as Appropriation Art, a movement Colescott sometimes is said to have anticipated. But Colescott's influences and experiences differed radically from those of artists working conceptually. He took the question of his place in art history personally and humorously. Although in the 1970s his steady involvement with painting, figuration, and self-expression was outside the mainstream, those issues all came forward in the art of the 1980s with Neo-Expressionism.

Nevertheless, he didn't become an art star. Since the art world is always looking for new young artists, his age probably counted against him more than his race. He might have had more museum shows if his art hadn't offended, at one time or another (as Holland Cotter recently pointed out in *The New York Times*), "practically every audience, male or female, black or white, politically left or right." Maybe if Colescott had lived in New York for any extended period he would have received more notice. However, he stayed in California until 1985, and then took a long-lasting teaching job at the University of Arizona, Tucson. He still lives in Tucson, though he has retired from teaching. This year, his star rose. He represented the United States in the 1997 Venice Biennale, with the show traveling in 1998-9 to six American museums, beginning with the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

"In this corner, representing the United States of America," wrote Calvin Tomkins in *The New Yorker*, "Weighing in with nineteen honest-to-God paintings on canvas, stands Robert Colescott. What a surprise!" The 1980s art world interest in painting had somehow sputtered out. Roberta Smith, reviewing the Venice Biennale in *The New York Times*, explained that "the art in the national pavilions and the main exhibition alike reflected the latest swings in the esthetic pendulum: the growing interest in narrative, often of a mythological sort, as well as the widespread use of film and video and a nearly total lack of interest in painting."

After describing several Neo-Conceptual works that impressed her, Smith went on in this way: "The traditional art object had only a few convincing defenders. At the American Pavilion, Robert Colescott's bright, luscious paintings, with their raucous figurative style and caustically ribald commentary on American racism, turned in one of the more solid performances here." Tomkins agreed, speaking of Colescott's work in the American Pavilion: "There's something here to offend almost everyone, but there's also real painting—a fluid interaction of form and color which derives, through many permutations, from Fernand Leger, with whom Colescott once studied, and from Pablo Picasso, the artist he thinks about most often these days."

Colescott says he likes Picasso because he always did exactly what he wanted to do, and he did it in a big way. In his art, Colescott has emulated that attitude. At Crown Point, we were surprised when he appeared the first day of work with a huge eight-panel painting on paper that he wanted to use as the basis for what was to be his first experience with etching. "Ignorance is bliss," he told his visitors in the studio. "I needed plenty of help. I had to learn another craft." After conferring with Dena Schuckit, the printer in charge, I recommended that we leave off four side panels (which were functioning like a frame) and try for a print something like the central four sections of the painting. Colescott agreed but, even so, we were talking about a ten-foot long print. I didn't say so at the time, but I thought our chances of success were only about 50-50. I knew it would depend on the artist's flexibility in the face of difficulty.

Asked for an example of the difficulties, Colescott replied, after praising the printers for their patience, "The inks are transparent; you can't cover anything up. The metal you're drawing on reflects; all you can see is your own nose. I felt like a duck out of water. This was very humbling because after fifty years of painting I was thinking that by now I should know what I'm doing. But," he continued, pointing to the big print on the wall, "Look at all those forms squirming! I love it! I didn't know what a big job it would be for a first-timer. But I'm on my feet."

He certainly is.

—Kathan Brown

Note: I have relied on information and quotations from:
Holland Cotter, *The New York Times*, June 8, 1997 • Sally Eauclaire, *ARTnews*, June, 1997 • Sharon Fitzgerald, *American Visions Magazine*, June/July, 1997 • Faye Hirsch, *On Paper*, May-June, 1997 • Miriam Roberts, Catalog for the United States Pavilion, 47th Venice Biennale • Roberta Smith, *The New York Times*, June 16, 1997 • Calvin Tomkins, *The New Yorker*, May 9, 1997 • Notes made by me in discussions with the artist in the Crown Point studio.

Tom Marioni, *Drawing a Line as Far as I Can Reach (Second Version)*, 1996. Hard ground etching with plate tarnish printed in umber and black. Paper size: overall 77¼ x 19"; image size: overall 71¼ x 14⅞". Edition 10. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Tom Marioni

New Release

Tom Marioni drew the first version of *Drawing a Line as Far as I Can Reach* in 1972, twenty-five years ago. He sat on the floor holding a pencil, a length of brown wrapping paper on the wall in front of him. Over and over he began a line at the bottom of the paper, reaching to finish the line as far upward as he could. He sharpened his pencil frequently, and repeated the gesture in approximately the same spot until the pencil was too short to hold. He said the resulting drawing was a representation of a tree, and added that the pencil used-up in making the drawing had originally come from a tree. The drawing is now in the collection of the Oakland Museum.

Marioni did the first print version of *Drawing a Line as Far as I Can Reach* in 1984. He sat on the floor in our Oakland studio with three copper plates, one above the other, fastened on the wall in front of him. (Our press would not accommodate a single plate of the required length.) We had covered the plates with wax hard ground, and he broke through the ground over and over with a steel etching needle. This time, he drew till he was tired. When the etching was printed (on three sheets of paper), he chose reddish-brown ink. This print was included in the recent Crown Point Press retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington D. C. and at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco.

After some proofs were made and a small edition was completed, Marioni took the three copper plates home and left them outside to weather for twelve years, then—in 1996—brought them back to Crown Point Press to be printed again. By that time we had added a slightly larger press to the Crown Point studio, and we were able to make the print on a single sheet of paper. The tarnish the copper plates had acquired held ink and provided a shadowy natural background. The collection of fine lines that form the large sinewy line of the image is now beautifully contained in an accumulated record of change in nature. Marioni chose a golden-brown earth color for the background and this time printed the line in black. He asked that the sides of the plates be narrowed slightly, so this print is more scroll-like than the earlier version. We are now releasing *Drawing a Line as Far as I Can Reach (Second Version)*, 1996.

Marioni's work with repeated and delicate gesture drawing as body measurement made a contribution to the early history of Conceptual Art. A group of his drawings of this type from the early 1970s are included in the exhibition "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979" at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA in Los Angeles opening in February, 1997.

Notes

In the Crown Point Gallery

Robert Colescott: ***New Works on Paper***, January 15 - February 28. Please join us for an opening with the artist, January 27, from 6 - 8.

Located downstairs from Crown Point, **Refusalon** exhibits new sculpture by **Gay Outlaw**, January 8 - February 28.

In New York

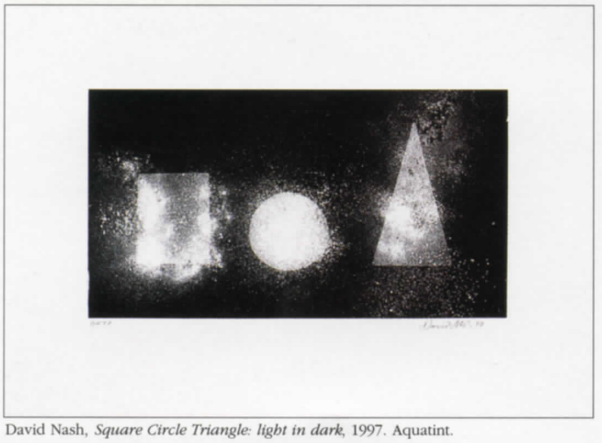
Karen McCready Fine Art, 425 W. 13 St., presents "Great Graphics!" with works by Bailey, Cage, Celmins, Diebenkorn, Dine, Lichtenstein, Steir, Thiebaud and Winters, among others, through January.

Exhibitions

William T. Wiley: 60 Works for 60 Years will show at the Albrecht Kemper Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, through March 15.

Sol LeWitt: Photographs and Wall Drawings 1969 - 1998 exhibits at the Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, through February 28.

David Nash, *Square Circle Triangle: black in light*, 1997. Aquatint reversal. Paper size: 29½ x 36⅞"; image size: 14 x 22-7/8". Edition 20. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



David Nash, *Square Circle Triangle: light in dark*, 1997. Aquatint. Paper size: 19¾ x 27"; image size: 10¾ x 18⅞". Edition 20. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

David Nash

New Releases

David Nash is an English Land artist, part of a tradition of artists who are individually different in their approaches to making art but are linked in that their primary work is executed in the rural or wild outdoors. Richard Long and Hamish Fulton (who began this sort of work somewhat earlier than Nash) and Andy Goldsworthy (who began somewhat later) are, with Nash, the best known Land artists.

Although Nash makes some work that is ephemeral in the landscape, most of his works are sculpture pieces, sometimes portable, sometimes not. They employ traditional forms fashioned by straightforward handwork occasionally augmented by natural forces like fire or erosion. He usually works with wood from whole trees that have died; through his intervention, they receive new life as sculpture. He generally finds his forms in the wood: the way it has grown, the way it splits, or—sometimes—the way it burns. He looks for form that is basic, or seems to be underlying, and then emphasizes it, repeats it, or improvises on it.

Nash is interested in Chinese poetry and has done several lengthy projects in Japan, and these connections play a part in his fascination with the forms of the square, circle, and triangle—or cube, sphere, and pyramid. The notion that all natural things have an underlying geometric structure—crystals, molecules, atoms for example—is not specifically Asian. However, in Zen painting there is tradition going back hundreds of years implying that the circle, square, and triangle, in themselves, have an anchoring effect on human beings.

Nash's two aquatints, being released by Crown Point Press, use these forms. In *Square Circle Triangle: light in dark*, the forms are insubstantial, seemingly made by light, illuminated from within. They appear to be throwing off light into the black background. In *Square Circle Triangle: black in light* the forms are weighty, pulling in on themselves like black holes, grounded in a large white area of exposed paper. Nash has done a number of sculptures of spheres, pyramids and cubes set side by side. Some have been fashioned of wood and then charred. The resulting blackness, he says, turns your attention from the organic material of the wood to the mineral material (carbon) caused by fire. In these sculptures and also in the etchings, the elemental forms are modified by the materials, and also by the human activity used to create them.

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