

Stark view

New realists catch lonely echo of cities

This is the first of two articles dealing with new realism. "America in the '70s as Depicted by Artists in the Richard Brown Baker Collection" is currently on view at Meadow Brook Art Gallery. The gallery is located in Wilson Hall, at Oakland University in Rochester. The show continues through December.

By HELEN ZUCKER

A country that doesn't take care of its cities or its citizens is going to get environmentalist art.

The new realists, painting steadily away for the past 15 years, have come into their own and have given the U.S. exactly what it deserves.

The movement has come a long way from Larry Stark's rather funny photo-realist show in 1970. Stark's show was called "Crossing The U.S.A. Eating at MacDonald's All The Way."

It featured huge, hazy photos of french fries and Stark's van. It included shots of the photographer checking his weight as he criss-crossed America eating cheeseburgers.

There was a home-movie, pop art quality about Stark's show. But in retrospect, I realize I shouldn't have laughed.

Stark's show was a fuzzy forerunner of today's sophisticated work. These beautifully composed canvasses deal with subject matter that Stark touched upon in his journey toward the ultimate Big Mac attack.

THE VAST CANVASSES of the early years of new realism, — works that depict a single car fender, a fold of satin, a single headlight, the experiments with blowups of a single face — (Chuck Close's six-foot features still haunt me) — are gone.

What has replaced these early attempts to move away from the purely conceptual and back into the real world has nothing to do with the old Dutch painters of objects, the school to which new realism is often compared.

The 40 extraordinary paintings at the Meadowbrook Gallery are the offspring of American literature of the '20s and '30s, of books that warned us of what we now endure in our cities.

No one listened. And the cities are here. And so are the painters who can handle the subject matter.

NOEL MAHAFFEY captures the slick shine of rain, the night-time feel of Paul Schrader's movie, "Taxi," in an oil called "Louisiana Superdome — Times Square 1977."

MahaFFEY's painting is lifted out of a mere literal rendering by a slight blurring of focus, the great orange glare of a Nedick's sign that reflects like an oil slick on the wet sidewalk; by the Colonel's face that hovers over Times Square the way the optometrist's sign — the eye of Dr. Ogilvie — hovers over the ashes of West Egg in Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby."

Nedick's, the Colonel's face, and the blinking letters of "Hotel" echo through the canvas. The sidewalks are empty. Cars slide by, taillights reflecting the next.

An arrow points from one Kentucky Fried Chicken sign to the next. There are no people. Shadows drive the cars.

"Louisiana Superdome — Times Square 1977" captures the silence of a street that was once one of the liveliest boulevards in the world. The cacophony, the desperation, the mad, haunting signs are depicted through silence.

This is a city for the deaf and mute. One smells nothing, despite the proliferation of food signs. This is a created environment, not a world for moving, breathing people.

Lowell Nesbitt's "Manhattan Bridge 1975" is a blocky, lonely, wonderful painting. A heavy, black shadow — absurd, but artistically right — crosses the water and cuts right through the iron fence railings along the shoreline.

We see the bridge from underneath — a black stretch of metal that extends into the city and beyond. The supports, the water, the sky, are all in brilliant sunlight. The base of the bridge, sunk in the river, is black as coal.

The painting exudes a terrific sense of vacancy. One wonders if everyone but artists and movie makers have stopped using the Manhattan Bridge.

Nesbitt's vision is very different from the view of the bridge as an escape route as it is used in "Saturday Night Fever," or as Gershwin's magic place in Woody Allen's "Manhattan." Nesbitt seems to be telling everyone to get out of the awful Big Apple. I like his nerve — and his sense of composition.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM's "Facade 1970" seems to back up Nesbitt's vision, despite differences in style. Cottingham's oil is filled with hard, angular lines, sweeping vertical shapes and close-ups of signs that recall Eisenstein's use of industrial shapes and shadows in the early days of film.

The painting is meticulous, beautifully balanced, subtle — and cold as ice. H.N. Haas' "East River View" is seen through a pointillist, poetic smog.

Han seems to accept the smog as part of the natural landscape.

He dots the blurry outlines of East River Drive with orange dots as if to say, "See folks, foliage still grows here. Isn't that amazing?"

Han seems to think the fog will eventually blanket the city, blot it from sight.

"STARDUST MOTEL" by John Baeder takes us from N.Y. to the Las Vegas Strip. Things don't look much different out in the desert.

The jumpy energy of a country exploding with vitality skids to an abrupt halt in Baeder's precise rendering of empty cars and mammoth signs. The signs stretch as far as the eye can see, swallowing the desert.

Ralph Golings' "Walk's Restaurant" is a polished piece of pure Americana.

Though the painting forces our eye outside the diner where light (and pickup trucks) exist, we return to the dim, shiny, plastic interior. The eye circles past the tabletops, the jukeboxes featuring Elvis and Frampton and comes to rest on the central figure.

The sad old man stirring coffee resembles one of sculptor George Segal's mummified creations. Nothing breathes in this still life. The painting is matter of fact — beyond pity or terror.

Concerts celebrate Christmas

Two concerts on Sunday, Dec. 16 will provide music appropriate for the approaching holiday season.

The Madrigal Club of Detroit, now based in the Southfield under the Southfield Arts Council, will present a Christmas program at 8 p.m. Sunday at Bloomfield Hills Baptist Church, 3600 Telegraph, Bloomfield Hills. Tickets, \$3.50 and \$2.50 for children and senior citizens will be available at the door.

The Bel Canto Ensemble, a group of vocal and instrumental artists under the direction of Sergio Pezzetti of Southfield, will present a 7 p.m. program of sacred music at St. Regis Catholic Church, Lincoln and Lahser, Birmingham.

The Bel Canto Ensemble, formed in 1978, is composed of all soloist singers who study the Bel Canto technique with Pezzetti. Their program will feature two premieres. One is the "Gloria" written by Pezzetti for the ensemble in honor of Pope John Paul's recent visit to the United States.

The other is an American premiere of "Filiae Jerusalem," a sacred cantata based on the Song of Solomon by Ildebrando Pizzetti. Other works on the program will be a selection of Handel's "Messiah," Bach Cantata 57, the Marcello Oboe Concerto and Christmas carols arranged by Pezzetti.

Do you really need that car?

Due to inflation, a reappraisal of the tax and other financial considerations of car ownership is needed, say the Michigan Certified Public Accountants.

If you have been taking the standard mileage allowance of 17 cents as the deduction for your business driving, this might be the time to start keeping track of your actual expenses, the CPAs say, with a view toward itemizing.

With gasoline above a dollar a gallon and other car costs up almost as much, the 17-cent allowance (10 cents after the first 15,000 miles) is unrealistic for many drivers.

Although state taxes on gasoline are no longer separately deductible on federal income tax returns, they can still be included as a deductible business driving expense when such expenses are incurred.

WITH INFLATED driving costs, some employers have been prompted to buy vans for use by employees in getting to and from work. The employees share operating costs with the driver riding for nothing. Employers not only get investment tax credit on the van, but the need for parking space is sharply reduced.

Car poolers enjoy savings that can total hundreds of dollars a year. If they commute in a company-owned vehicle, the CPAs say, they may be eligible for an additional saving such as reduced insurance premiums on the family car. This is offered by some insurers on low-mileage automobiles.

With the values of some used cars, notably fuel-efficient ones, not dropping as far nor as quickly as they once did, CPAs suggest continuing collision-insurance coverage beyond the two or three years many car owners buy such protection.

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