

Third-generation resident

Farmington artist paints way of life



Mrock paints the common and uncommon

By CORINNE ABATT

There is a temptation to compare Farmington-area painter Allen Mrock with Andrew Wyeth. It isn't really fair to either—but there are certain similarities.

Both are men of the land, born and raised in rural areas. Both have a deep love of an uncomplicated way of life and a fine talent for sharing it through their art.

The 32-year-old Mrock, raised on Inkster Road just north of Eleven Mile, doesn't object to the comparison. He, too, feels a kinship with the Chatsford, Pa., artist. He also predicts comparisons will be less obvious in a few years as he moves to a wider field of subject matter.

"I have lived here all my life, and I have painted everything in the three-square-mile area. I am the third generation of Mrocks to live on this property."

MROCK CONSIDERS HIMSELF a Michigan painter with a strong commitment to depict a disappearing way of life and the landmarks which characterized it.

While he and his family spend part of every summer near Charlevoix, and he would someday like to live there permanently, Mrock's subject matter goes beyond the rural areas.

He works from one major theme to another. He is planning a series of paintings on Detroit.

"I have seen a lot of things in Detroit that people wouldn't believe. I would like to compare the new and old. There's some stark contrasts between the old and the future Detroit. I feel committed to record these differences. So much has been destroyed in the city already."

Soon he will take his sketchbook to Detroit, wander the partially deserted streets looking for remnants of the past, fragments of beauty buried among the ruins and bits and pieces that promise a brighter future.

A realistic painter in that his subjects are recognizable, Mrock makes his visual statements through his ability to expose the core nerve of the scene. Only a few railroad ties with the weeds growing between need be shown to indicate the track has long been abandoned. Only a broken window and door swinging loosely from its hinges are required to indicate the farm's decline.

A COMMERCIAL ARTIST with General Motors, Mrock finds his two vocations compatible. Techniques he develops often apply to both.

As a painter he is presently working almost exclusively in acrylics. Yet, it is difficult for an untrained eye to detect which of the paintings on his studio wall are acrylic and which are watercolors. Normally, anyone who has ever spread a little watercolor on a sheet of paper can detect it, but Mrock developed a build-up technique with watercolors which produces unusual depth and texture. After five or six washes, he sprays a fixative, a resin, and continues applying colors.

"Once you spray the fixative, the next colors will sprout and create unusual effects. The fixative also changes the colors. It depends then—you have to know and expect that."

He also prefers to build up Masonite surfaces for painting.

In preparing for a one-man show such as the one at the Robert Thom Gallery of Birmingham in 1973, Mrock first did a large portfolio of pencil sketches on location. Four months later, working every evening and every weekend, the completed show was ready to hang. He works only through the Robert Thom Gallery.

Yet, even for someone like Mrock who thoroughly enjoys his work as a painter and commercial artist, there are moments of frustration.

WHILE HE IS BEGINNING to detect a turn-around in attitude toward realistic artists—for a long time they ran a poor fifth to top, hard edge and impressionists—he wishes the change would speed up.

"I think realism is coming back. People are tired of the five minute paintings and they want to see more in art."

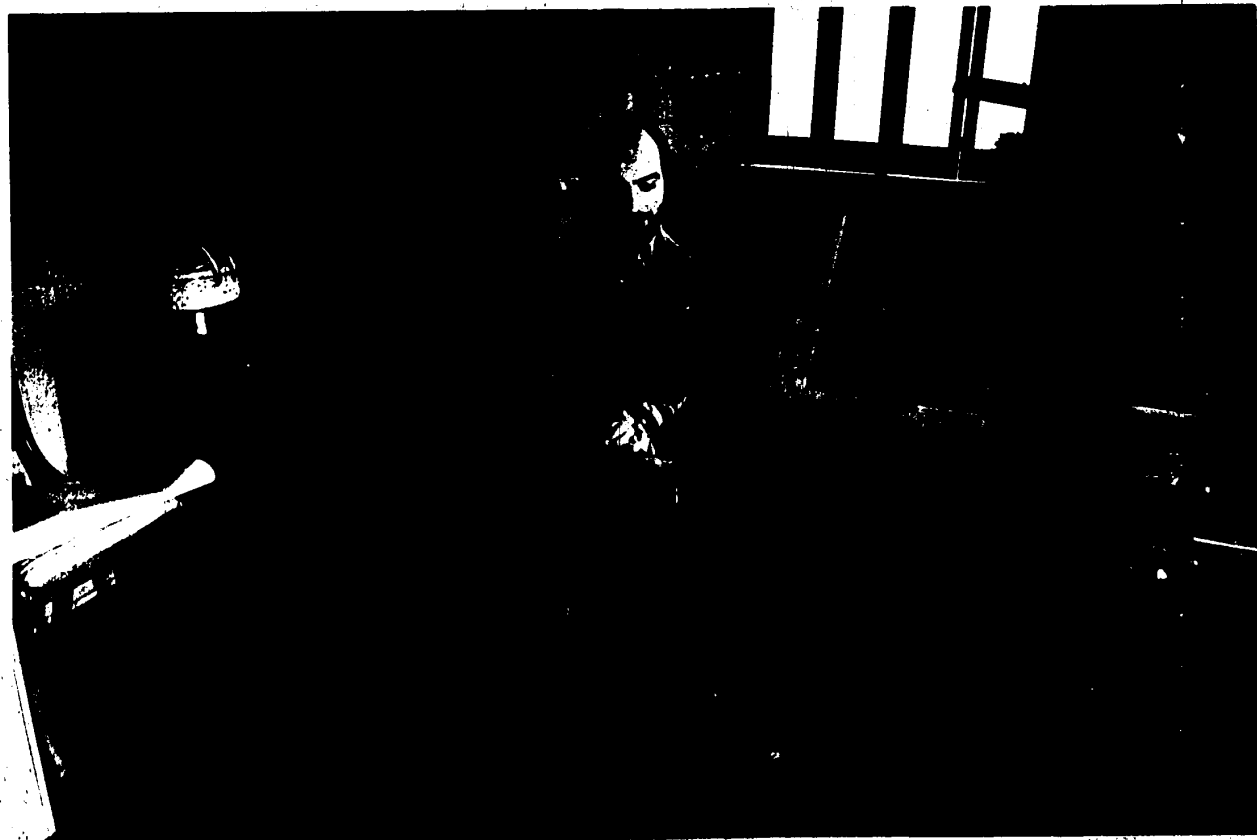
He mentions the difficulty a realistic painter has in being accepted in major shows. Few major galleries in the metropolitan area show Michigan painters, he adds.

This, in turn, puts the blame on the art-buying public who still feel that anything they buy in New York, London, or San Francisco is superior to what they would find at home.

One small light at the end of the tunnel is the register of Michigan artists which the Detroit Institute of Arts is building. Mrock would like to see it include a slide file of paintings as well.

Mrock was president of the Farmington Artist Club from 1971 through 1973. He won 17 awards from the club and has exhibited in many communities in the metropolitan area.

Soon he wants to see more of the world beyond his home state. For now, Michigan still holds challenges and a family which includes his wife, Bonnie, Allen, 15, Terry, 12 and Sheri, 6.



Allen Mrock rests in his studio (Staff photos)