

English gardens inspired this colorist

By HELEN ZUCKER

The Allen Rubiner Gallery has one of the best shows I've seen this year. Robert Burkert's recent oils, monotypes, and serigraphs are the work of a sure, highly original artist. Burkert's superb technique is always at the service of his content. His art delights.

Despite Burkert's enormous knowledge of the varied mediums he works in, the machinery behind his art is not evident. He has ambition, vision, and reach — all shown by the 35 works on view.

Burkert and his equally literate, gifted wife, Nancy Eckolm Burkert, were in town for the opening of Burkert's show on March 10 and for a book signing party at the Birmingham Book Store on March 11. Ms. Burkert illustrates children's books for Alfred Knopf, Harper and Row, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, and Ballantine Books.

SHE HAS PUBLISHED six titles and is currently working on a book about whales. She is also illustrating Edward Lear's "The Harmony of All Creatures." Ms. Burkert believes that there really is no distinction between "fine art" and "illustration" when one is dealing with illustrators of Arthur Rackham's and Beatrix Potter's art. Daumier is certainly no "mere illustrator," and the remarkable "Phiz," the pseudonym for H. N. Browne, the original illustrator of Dickens' volumes, was a remarkably gifted artist. There are many others. That caliber of illustration passes easily into the realm of fine art.

Ms. Burkert believes that "the world overwhelms people verbally." She is upset that library journals, newspaper reviews, and children's literature associations pay little attention to visual content.

Though pictures wake children to reading quite as much as sound does, the typical review in "The New York Times Book Review," Ms. Burkert maintains, has a tag line on the end saying something about "pleasant" or "unpleasant" pictures, as if the whole subject were of minor importance. The current Bruno Bettelheim thesis — books should have no pictures so children can form their own images — angers Ms. Burkert and many artists.

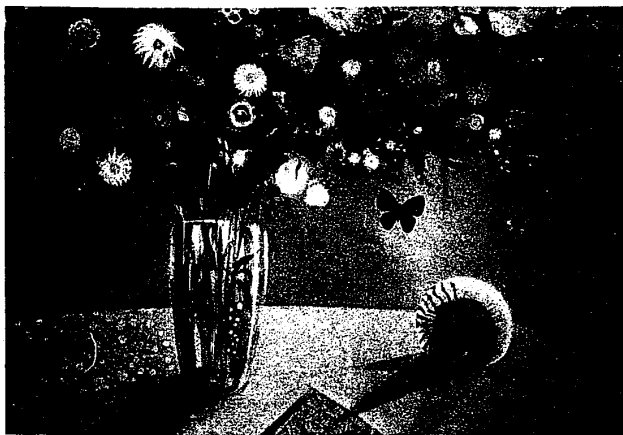
The Burkerks spent five months in England last year. "London," says Burkert, "is a city that cultivates eccentrics."

Neither of the Burkerks believe that England is falling apart. A country that takes such incredible care of its many gardens, its enormous quantities of art works, its ancient nooks and crannies, is, they feel, "essentially civilized, saveable, liveable."

Burkert, who is head of the graphics department at the University of Wisconsin, took a group of students on the trip. He teaches grad students, freshmen, and a "drawing class in between," so he can keep in touch with all levels.

HE WAS SURPRISED at the sudden sophistication that contact with London gave his students, and with the amount of work they produced. Burkert drew a great deal and kept a "London Journal" — drawings, and a list of parks and gardens that grew daily. Most of his tips on "great gardens" came from passing strangers. He said people would stop, peer over his shoulder, and tell him: "You'll get a better job out of the park three blocks away."

Advice from the "natives" has paid off handsomely in the current show. "Garden," a large oil, captures the years of careful toil that go into English gardening. The speckled lawns, divided into separately planted plots, are



Oil painting by Robert Burkert combines many elements of beauty, but puts it all in a time framework with the magazine. (Staff photos by Stephen Cantrell)

echoed in the sky, the falling water in the fountain at the end of the garden. It's an extraordinarily organized, complex painting. Yet it breathes serenity. "Chelsea Flower Show" catches the English love affair with fresh flowers, blooming soil.

In fact, the Burkerks lived in Chelsea quite by accident. She was attracted to a primitive, strangely beautiful old house that hadn't been lived in for years. After they'd moved in, she found they were living in the house Agatha Christie shared with her second husband. "The house," she said, "was filled with friendly ghosts."

While Ms. Burkert visited the Winsor-Newton paintmakers (WN is the only paint she uses), he drew the rose gardens at Hampton Court, trees, baskets, bushes, and continued his sojourn through London's parks. He said he "never made it to half of them and would love to go back."

BURKERT HAS A TERRIFIC sense of color. He is an admirer of Emil Nolde, one of the greatest colorists who ever lived. I liked a monotype called "Evergreen." The hills and land dive toward the center of the picture, the red sky bursts above the earth. It is



Robert Burkert has many stories about London and its gardens.

filled with the sweetness of morning air — a hot sense of speed, of the passing brilliance of the day. The whole is wonderfully controlled. So is "The Painter's Butterfly," a monotype that is a Blakeian vision of the painter's urge to soar, to understand the heart of things.

"Wild Apples" is a beautifully wrought, delicate serigraph. "Summer Palette," "Flowered Fields," "River Palette," carry out the promise inherent in their titles.

My favorite work was a small monotype called "Pharaoh." The drawing is very fine, the blue that flows out of the frame into the surrounding area is just right. Most of the monotypes deal with the passing landscape. They are filled with action, — with the notable exception of a portrait of James Joyce.

There are several fascinating oils. I liked "Interior Crete," "The Chambered Nautilus," and "Egyptian Still Life" very much. These are rich, complex paintings that capture stillness, the aura of rooms and their lonely inhabitants.



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Freeman leaves for new position

Paul Freeman, the Detroit Symphony's conductor-in-residence since 1970, has accepted the post of music director of the Victoria Symphony Orchestra in British Columbia, Canada.

Maestro Freeman is scheduled to conduct the Detroit Symphony Orchestra during its annual In-School Concert series May 14-27, and will be on the podium for a week-long engagement next December in the major subscription series.

The Victoria Symphony Orchestra is the fifth largest symphony orchestra in Canada and operates on a 35-week season, giving 12 subscription concerts, each repeated two or three times. In addition, the orchestra annually makes a major three-week tour of the region. The Victoria Symphony's budget for 1979-80 will exceed \$1 million.

Freeman was appointed music director of the Saginaw, Michigan Symphony in November of 1978 and he will retain this post through the 1979-80 season, concurrent with the position in Victoria. He maintains a very active guest-conducting schedule in this country and abroad and has conducted some 18 major orchestras in the United States including the New York Philharmonic, Cleveland and Chicago symphony orchestras and more than 25 European orchestras. In 1974-76 he served as principal guest-conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic and associate conductor of the Dallas Symphony from 1968-70.

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