

# TOUGH REALISM

## Invitational Painting Exhibition

The paintings and drawings selected for this exhibition embody a search for authenticity and character in contemporary realism. They elude the classification of picturesque or idealized figuration. This grouping of artists is by no means meant to be inclusive; rather, specific works were chosen which best captured the theme of "tough realism" in the author's interpretation of the theme. The human figure is often represented within a psychologically charged environment, or unsettling scenes of urban life predominate. Making a myth out of the mundane, these contemporary figurative painters use cinematic devices such as stop action, cropping, and extreme close-up to create a stage where the sordid and commonplace aspects of city life and its unpredictable encounters are enacted.

Fred Folsom, whose triptych *"Last Call"* took four years to complete, is a painter whose achievements are ambitiously realized in the magnitude of this composition. Drawing on personal experiences, the artist depicts the "watering hole" as a setting for contemporary "tribal" gatherings. Identifiable characters mix with anonymous blue collar workers and engage in social interaction at a local club, the Shepherd Park Go Go Club. Familiar characters from impressionist paintings mingle with local eccentrics, Washington artists, and great philosophers at this bar. Although the artist documents a real place and moment in time with confident rendering of the myriad details of reality, the characters are remarkably remote and maintain their isolation of introspection. Folsom has sympathy for common people and a respect for humanity that is extraordinarily spiritual. Folsom works in the traditional techniques of old master painting, building up his surface with solid drawing, underpainting, and glazes. The ability to manage and interrelate large figural groups recalls the grand paintings of Veronese. Closer to home, the satirical bite of Paul Cadmus' work can be sensed in the artist's characterizations.

Robert Birmelin has been singled out for, "the ability to both choreograph figures in space and give each of them a dramatic identity . . ." <sup>1</sup> The artist uses his paintings to point to an awareness of social conditions that suggest anarchy, anger, and isolation. In *Fire on Seventh Avenue*, an ambiguous event taking place in the street is open to interpretation--is there an implied threat of riot and doom? This is achieved through

manipulation of the space in the composition, the dramatic angle of vision, cropping, and the way in which characters react to each other as the event unfolds. Robert Birmelin's thorough familiarity with art history informs his art, and surely Caravaggio's "uncompromising" realism has been an inspiration to the artist. He depicts the industrial landscape of the twentieth century and its inhabitants as unromantically as Caravaggio's common street characters, and transcends surface appearances to create symbolic unity. He, too, uses cropping, dramatic chiaroscuro, night scenes, and eloquent gestures to increase a sense of mystery and impending drama to his narratives. Unlike Caravaggio's use of neutral backgrounds, Birmelin uses the streetscape and its detritus to heighten the sense of place. In *Street Crossing--Signals at Night*, the use of transparency in painting figures ingeniously depicts the shadowy way we assimilate peripheral vision and random perceptions. <sup>2</sup> If Folsom's paintings are static, Birmelin's subjects are in constant motion.

George Green's *An American Horror Story--the Last Judgment of the City*, a profoundly haunting image, is characteristic of a new series, as yet incomplete, about the inhumane aspects of city life. The study for the falling baby, with its skyline background, was based on a newspaper account of the miraculous survival of a child after a fall from an upper tenement window. The apocalyptic vision of the city without a conscience is fulfilled. <sup>3</sup>

Lisa Brotman paints images of women that have the ethereal, air-brushed look of "pin-up" nostalgia. They are vulnerable, yet aggressive, beckoning, yet aloof. The painting, *"I'll protect you," he said*, portrays a figure posed in an organic cocoon-like chair; although daggers surround her, she seems unconcerned. The gestural brushstrokes present a neutral foil to the extreme tension of the concept. The viewer is invited to check behind the veil of one woman's perception of liberation. <sup>4</sup>

An improbable event, the strangeness of which is heightened by its juxtaposition with a neutral or familiar set of objects, landscape, or circumstances, is characteristic of the work of Sidney Goodman and other artists drawn from the University's collection of paintings, and are exemplary of the theme, "tough realism."

October 14-November 5, 1987

The Dimock Gallery

The George Washington University

Lower Lisner Auditorium

21st and H Streets, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20052

(202) 994-1525

Gallery Hours: T, W, Th, F: 10-5, SAT: 12-5, MON: Closed to the public

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**REALISM**  
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A. BROTMAN, "I'll protect you," he said, 1983, oil on linen, 54" x 54".

(Photo credit: Gregor Assoc.)



ROBERT BIRME LIN, *Fire on Seventh Avenue* (second version), 1982, acrylic on canvas, 70" x 78".

(Photograph credit: Gregory Staley)



FOLSOM, "Last Call" (at the Shepherd Park Go Go Club), 1983-87, triptych, oil and acrylic on canvas, 6 1/2' x 19 1/2'.

(Photograph credit: Breger Assoc.)

*The Pool* is a painting which elicits a double take. Goodman, since the early 60s, has been an observer of the jagged side of reality. It depicts the look of suburban American life, devoid of soul, scrutinized under the cold, eerie light of a laboratory. If we compare the most recent work of Fischl and Salle, the same strange loss of objectivity in a seemingly innocuous setting takes place. *The Pool* seems to swallow up reality and its visitors in the blurred incorporation of a figure into the leafy background. Again, the human figure is a symbol of mortality and alienation.

Joseph Shannon's work, *Wild Goose*, is typical of his highly charged, agitated compositions which often juxtapose animals and humans, as if pieces of reality were cut up and rearranged at will. The terror and violence with which social and institutional ills are fraught are perpetrated on average but downtrodden individuals.<sup>5</sup> Who is the victim and who is the victimizer? There is a strong autobiographical element in his works. Ben Forgey reported on Shannon's Mint Museum show (1979):

*There is a sense of provocation in [Shannon's] social painting that is, or can be almost hallucinating in its intensity . . . It is intended to propel the viewer beyond initial revulsion caused by the 'offensiveness' of the subject matter to a sense of heightened awareness of the social reality*

*in which he or she moves, and from there to an intensified self-awareness.*<sup>6</sup>

The Ash Can School was the first American group of artists to concentrate on the life of the city in a hopeful and matter-of-fact manner. The roots of "tough realism" can be found in the American Scene movement, which incorporated Regionalists and Social Realists. The leading Social Realists accepted the nation's urbanization as progress: Ben Shahn, William Gropper, and the Soyers presented the city and its ills in a reportorial manner, raising public consciousness of its injustices. Realism can idealize or patronize its subject matter. The artists chosen for the exhibition reflect a tendency toward expressing humanism and sensitivity for subjects considered unworthy of glorification, at least in large format compositions, in the grand manner of history and religious painting of the past.

Maybe it is time we looked again at those aspects of realist painting not as a "window on the world," but as a tunnel into the very soul of humanity; not just as surface appearance, but as the physiognomy. The viewing of such art can be provocative and disturbing, but ultimately challenges the soul and wrenches the heart.

Lenore D. Miller  
Curator of Art

<sup>1</sup> John Yau, "Disrupted Narratives: the Recent Paintings of Robert Birmelin," *Arts Magazine* 58 (March 1984): 114-115.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore F. Wolff, *On Being an Observer--Robert Birmelin* (New York: Sherry French Gallery, March 5-March 29, 1986, exhibition catalogue), n. pag.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Skidmore Sasser, "George Green, Houston," *Artspace* 10 (Fall 1986): 46.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Tuft, *Lisa Montag Brotman* (Washington, D.C.: Gallery K, 1983, exhibition catalogue), n. pag.

<sup>5</sup> Nina Felshin, *Metarealities* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Project for the Arts, 1980), n. pag.

<sup>6</sup> The Art Association of Newport, *Narrative Realism* (Newport, Rhode Island: The Art Association of Newport, 1979), n. pag.

## Checklist of the Exhibition

The Dimock Gallery is grateful to the artists, collectors, and galleries for making the works available for loan.

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| <p>1. ROBERT BIRMELIN<br/><i>Fire on Seventh Avenue</i><br/>(second version) 1982<br/>Acrylic on canvas<br/>70" x 78"<br/>Collection Mr. and Mrs. John B. Brough</p> | <p>6. JIM CARROLL III<br/><i>Harold Smith...</i> 1976<br/>Pencil on paper<br/>11" x 15"<br/>CW Permanent Collection<br/>Gift of Rita Orzel 1986</p>  | <p>11. SIDNEY GOODMAN<br/><i>The Pool</i> 1965<br/>Oil on canvas<br/>71 1/4" x 95"<br/>GW Permanent Collection<br/>Gift of Dr. Louis Wener 1968</p>  |
| <p>2. ROBERT BIRMELIN<br/><i>Fire on the Pier</i> 1982<br/>Acrylic on canvas<br/>16" x 20"<br/>Collection Mr. and Mrs. John B. Brough</p>                            | <p>7. MANON CLEARY<br/><i>Self Portrait: Smoking</i> 1982<br/>Oil on canvas<br/>24" x 24"<br/>Courtesy Osuna Gallery</p>   | <p>12. GEORGE GREEN<br/><i>Falling Baby</i><br/>(study for <i>American Horror Story--Last Judgment of the City</i>) 1985-86<br/>Pastel on paper<br/>34" x 26"<br/>Courtesy Moody Gallery, Houston, Texas</p> |
| <p>3. ROBERT BIRMELIN<br/><i>Heat</i> 1981<br/>Acrylic on canvas<br/>79" x 71 1/2"<br/>Collection Professor Eric Sirulnik</p>  | <p>8. REBECCA DAVENPORT<br/><i>Mona Lisa Wall</i> 1986<br/>Oil and collage on canvas<br/>60" x 72"<br/>Courtesy Osuna Gallery</p>  | <p>13. ROBERT HYNES<br/><i>Flying at Rest</i><br/>Pencil on paper<br/>15" x 27"<br/>GW Permanent Collection<br/>Gift of Dr. Thomas Mathews 1986</p>  |
| <p>4. ROBERT BIRMELIN<br/><i>Street Crossing--Signals at Night</i> 1985<br/>Acrylic on canvas<br/>18" x 24"<br/>Collection Mr. and Mrs. John B. Brough</p>           | <p>9. FRED FOLSOM<br/><i>Gold Cross</i> 1979<br/>Pencil on paper<br/>27 1/2" x 22 1/4"<br/>GW Permanent Collection</p>   | <p>14. JOSEPH SHANNON<br/><i>Wild Goose</i> 1970<br/>Acrylic on canvas<br/>38" x 60"<br/>GW Permanent Collection<br/>Gift of Benjamin Nicolette 1985</p>   |
| <p>5. LISA BROTMAN<br/><i>"I'll protect you," he said</i> 1983<br/>Oil on linen<br/>54" x 54"<br/>Courtesy Gallery K</p>   | <p>10. FRED FOLSOM<br/><i>"Last Call" (at the Shepherd Park Go Go Club)</i> 1983-87<br/>Triptych<br/>Oil and acrylic on canvas<br/>6 1/2' x 19 1/2'<br/>Courtesy Gallery K<br/>(Funded in part by NEA Grant and Maryland State Arts Council)</p> | <p>15. JOSEPH SHEPPARD<br/><i>Locker Room</i><br/>Oil on canvas<br/>35 1/2" x 48"<br/>GW Permanent Collection<br/>Gift of Dr. Thomas Mathews 1966</p>  |