

Art in the Area

by Avra Schechter

Good Setting, High Standards

The Charles Burchfield Center on the Buffalo State campus provides an elegant and dignified setting for art, and the current Patteran exhibition thoroughly merits this background--setting and show complement each other.

Although the display consists of work from only one of the local artists' societies, it represents a wide range of styles and techniques. Standards are high; the show is a happy reminder of the quality and scope of art produced in our community. Not every piece is exceptional, and some are merely derivative; but these are offset by a number of outstanding works.

I found Will Harris' oil and acrylic of a sunset intriguing. The subject is far from unique, but the handling of it--the translation of natural phenomena into the language of a geometric abstract painting--is quite interesting. The sun here is a huge orange disc and, to emphasize the way a spectacular sunset dominates our vision, Harris reduces the sky to a narrow blue border. The blending streaks of color caused by the rays diffusing through the atmosphere are turned into even bands which cross the entire

canvas, the paint left to drip down from them.

Another dramatic sunset, this one viewed "Across the Desert," is contributed by Robert Blair. Here, the effect of the merging pinks and blues of the sky is captured by horizontal sweeps of water-colors bleeding into each other. Blair evokes the heat, intensity and expanse of the scene, but mars the work by including a tiny figure on horseback. While it might emphasize the vastness of the setting as well as the blending of land and sky into one, it is a sentimental detail that detracts from the composition. The rider also intrudes into Blair's "Canyon Wall," otherwise a dazzling desert scene which strikingly contrasts smooth, horizontal bands of sky and glistening terra cotta clay with a drop of rough, pink-orange rock.

Like Blair, James Koenig demonstrates great competence in handling color and composition in his more purely abstract works. His two "Ribbon Structures," in brilliant lavenders, orange, red and green, are hard-edge geometric designs which play with our perception of the painted surface. The "ribbons" almost seem to weave in and out of each other, but Koenig breaks off the color so that the eye can't follow a single strand continuously and is forced back to the surface.

Even more boldly colored are Sally Cook's busy, primitive-style canvases. The more successful, done primarily in a hot red shade, is "All Things in Life Are Beautiful Because They Might as Well Be." Like its title, the painting is rather precious and attempts too much. Surrounding a central female figure are trees at all seasonal stages--flowers bloom among fallen leaves. In addition to these natural delights are items of domestic pleasure: diminutive pieces of furniture, a cat snug on a patterned carpet. But the brightness and whimsy of Cook's work is a welcome relief from the somber pieces by Robert Senkpiel, which rest alongside it.

Senkpiel's theme is the destruction of spirituality in modern times through the worship of weapons technology. His most dramatic statement of this is the "Rommel Altarpiece," in which cutouts of German officers and gold-toned bullets replace traditional icons. The six-part construction, barely illuminated by electric bulbs in back, is effectively sobering.



Photo by Nelson

'ALL THINGS In Life Are Beautiful Because They Might as Well Be', by Sally Cook: brightness and whimsy.

The dehumanization and de-idealization of contemporary society is also a concern of Martha Visser't Hooft. In "The Oval Office, 1973," America's colors aren't red, white and blue: they are red, white and black. The composition is that of a stylized flag, similar to the one Mark Twain once designed in the same colors, with skulls replacing the stars. In Visser't Hooft's work, stripes cross the predominantly grey canvas at the center of which is a rectangle enclosing a black oval. Within the oval is a chair reminiscent of an electric chair--a "death seat." The artist's subtle substitutions are chilling.

Visser't Hooft uses black and grey again to different effect in "Captured Light," this time dividing the canvas between them. The central image suggests a free-form eye or movie projector, but no light enters or generates from it. The light is "captured" at the center in a patch of yellow-white paint. Small areas in varying tones of blue fan out from it, and Visser't Hooft's technique allows us to see how the pigments are applied over a light area on the right, over black on the left. The light is caught

in the very color it creates. The artist has managed to close it off, restrict it to certain areas and hold it down for the viewer to look at.

Perhaps the only other artist in the show who is Visser't Hooft's equal is Walter Prochownik. His oil, "Space Series XXXV," demonstrates an impressive mastery of color and refinement of style. A delicate trail of bright red streaks up the painting like the tail of a comet. Around it, the red-brown surface, blended with incredible subtlety, seems to pulsate and expand infinitely to the soft off-white edges. Prochownik's work suggests at once the endlessness of both outer space and the space of a painting; it is a remarkable creation.

The Patteran, and Buffalo as well, have much to delight and take pride in. The exhibition continues through March 3. Hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sundays, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.