

THOMAS DEVANEY

I like to watch

A RAINBOW OF OILY GRAYS shines on the street after a light shower. Larry and I jog a few steps to avoid a car whose horn scatters the foot traffic along Second and Market. Everyone is on the move as the pulse and noise of 5 o'clock rush hour push on into evening. Only tonight, everyone isn't trying to get home or out of the city for the weekend — because it is the first Friday of the month and the gallery-goers are out making their rounds to and fro across Second Street to the art galleries in Old City.

The first gallery we go into is showing an exhibit of photos. The next, representational inner-city streetscapes. Next, folk art in earth tones. Clay, stone, metal, wood. Next, surrealistic paintings and more photography. Then sculptures and some large abstract canvases that remind me of Robert Motherwell and remind Larry of Holstein cows. We spar a few rounds in the old art-imitates-art versus art-imitates-life debate. We have some wine. We laugh. Sometimes, as in the gallery with the surrealistic paintings, the artist himself is there to talk about his work.

So we talk. He is a tall man; his trousers are a little too short for him, and he is wearing a multicolor button-down shirt with a thin leather tie circa 1983. He says that he likes to have fun with painting and he hopes that people enjoy his lighthearted vision of surrealism. Apparently people do like his work because he said that the gallery had sold two of his paintings that evening. Larry and I both enjoy how he takes everyday objects out of their utilitarian environment and elevates them into Art.

In fact, one of the things I most enjoy about going to the galleries is that the way I see changes, the way I usually look at my everyday surroundings:

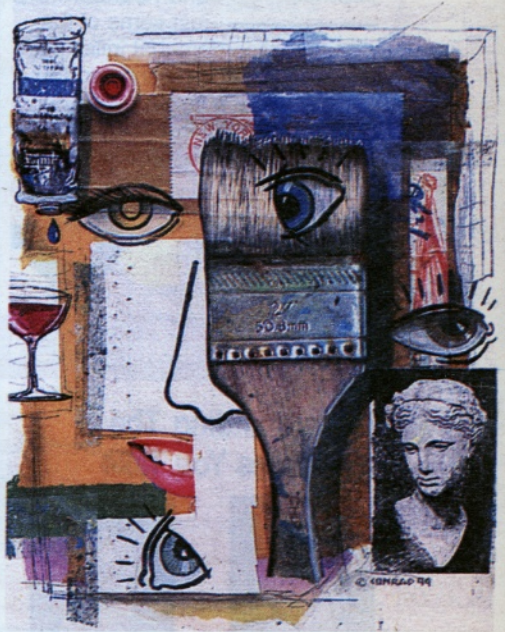
It is true that with some modern art you need to have an open mind or a good imagination (unless, of course, you have read the critics and you have "the word"). Usually I just rely on instinct. Do I like it? Would I possibly want to own this piece of art? Yes. Can I afford this piece of art? No. Or I hang out and listen to what other people say or even read comments written in the visitor

books. Perhaps I appreciate the art in the milieu of a gallery more than on my staircase wall.

To be fair, when gallery-going, everything must at least be suspect. Part of the fun of going to galleries is that they are filled with as-yet-undiscovered talents. Although most of the art and artists we see are usually unknown, sometimes a Name Artist or two are featured; at the least some are potentially famous. Therefore, we weigh our words carefully. We never want to be accused of being philistines. Nor do we want to risk the chance to spot the next van

just art. At the least, the eclectic multitude that comprises the crowd on First Friday could easily fill a Walt Whitman catalogue or two. There are the vintage-clothed art students from 12th and Pine with their paint-speckled shoes, society women from Rittenhouse Square, well-to-do baby boomers from the Main Line, grad students toting Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature*, businessmen in Brooks Brothers suits, businesswomen in Reeboks, an assortment of Ph.D.s and, of course, people of every cultural background and persuasion,

Yes, but
is it
imitation
— or
Holsteins
— or
philistines?



Gogh who is misunderstood by the unsympathetic masses.

And yet, we know the pleasure it is to rail against the artwork that we most dislike. Of course, we are not philistines, we tell ourselves: We are the viewers and the audience, and that must count for something. After all we have our taste; we know what gives us visual pleasure and what does not, and we must have some standards, no?

Really, the best part about First Friday is that if I am not interested in what I see on the walls, then I can always simply observe the activity happening around me.

After all, gallery-goers are as interesting to look at as the art on the walls, if not more so. Forget the idea that art is an imitation of reality because sometimes life is

and couples in every degree of love.

Later that night we go out to Downey's Pub for a drink. I think about the vast amount of artwork and the various types of people I saw and overheard. I think about how good the streets of Old City look with so many people in them and, overall, what a warm, relaxed and unpretentious feeling there was. Larry and I order our drinks, and he tries to decide whether or not to buy one painting over another. To be sure, there are several candidates, but we can't come to a decision. All the better, I later realize, for it ensures that we'll be back next First Friday to continue looking. ☐

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