

ECCENTRIC ALLEGORIES

Oakland / Mark Van Proyen

Because a group of artists all attended the same school, have exhibited together in the past and still continue to associate with each other seem poor reasons to bring them together in an exhibit. Happily, this time the resulting exhibit—*Seven Narrative Painters*, at the Mills College Art Gallery—is much better than poor. The seven artists presented here all made contact with each other at the California College of Arts and Crafts during the late sixties and early seventies and built lasting personal associations that have served to nurture each one's artistic development. Now, more than ten years after those original meetings, we have a chance to view a spectrum of recent work by each of these painters.

The three most impressive artists of the

group are James Albertson, Judith Linhares and Susan Whyne, and it's a shame that the latter two have chosen to leave the Bay Area for points east. Albertson's quirky revisions of myths and children's stories have a truly perverse quality that makes his paintings at once intriguing and irritating. A high degree of allegorical complexity is sustained by the way that this artist blends together references to the themes of classical art, kitsch-scapes of contemporary suburbia and lushly painted figures engaged in unrestrained lasciviousness. These paintings thrive on a peculiar ambivalence; we find ourselves wondering whether they are the product of a virtuoso painter or of an extremely talented maniac, one driven crazy by the nightmare of contemporary civilization.

Like Albertson, Whyne starts with the premise that the suburban landscape and mass-media culture are sources for nightmarish surreal imagery. Her special talent is her ability to juxtapose plushly rendered objects such as ungainly couches or brick barbecue pits with flat, cartoonishly depicted goings-on, thus producing painted surfaces that magically interlock very different modes of seeing. Linhares orchestrates a less ostentatious, more evocative magic act that connects the idiosyncratic territory of personal totemism to the iconography of myth. Whether in large works or small, this artist always is able to sweep the viewer into a pulsating whirlwind of lush color and beautifully choreographed paint.

A similarly pulsating quality is visible in work by Olive Ayhens. Ayhens produces schematic portrayals of otherworldly figures seen dancing about in an energized cosmos. I like Ayhens's watercolors best: they are intimate, yet charged with a quiet excitement. In this exhibition, however, her work is more uneven than that of the others, who are all quite consistent.

Elaine Wander's conflagratory portrayals of demonic characters interacting with each other seem almost to be colorful updates of Bosch's netherworlds. There are large oil paintings here, as well as gouache-on-paper pieces such as the artist has exhibited on earlier occasions. The move to larger scale works well for Wander; it is now easier for the viewer to be engulfed by the strange assortments of interlocked personages. In both large and small paintings, Wander seems totally absorbed in the world her work offers—a world as humorous as it is turbulent.

M. Louise Stanley's oil and watercolor paintings are stunning in their color, but



James Albertson, *Jack Fell Down*, 1984, oil on canvas, 48" x 37", at the Mills College Art Gallery, Oakland. Photo. ©1984 Sharon Golden.



Judith Linhares, *Cupid and Psyche*, 1983, oil on canvas, 52" x 76", at the Mills College Art Gallery, Oakland. Photo. ©1984 Sharon Golden.

the anecdotes that they depict (usually about male-female relationships) are excessively cute and blatantly sophomoric. Her more recent paintings are beginning to be disturbingly overstylized: they tend to look abbreviated in a way that recalls *New Yorker* cartoons.

The recent gouache paintings of Donna Mossholder have attained a consistency of focus that was lacking in her previously exhibited work, but that consistency seems to have been achieved at the expense of inventiveness. Overstylization seems again to be the culprit here, creating a coloring-bookish oversimplification of shapes. There are areas of interest in some of these paintings, but overall, the effect is tepid and repetitious.

The real success of *Seven Narrative Painters* lies in the breadth of each artist's presentation. This is a welcome deviation from the more usual group show that features fewer works by a larger number of artists. □