

# Joseph Chowning Gallery

# ARTWEEK

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## ALLEGORICAL PHANTOMS

San Francisco / Mark Van Proyen

In Robert Wise's film adaptation of Shirley Jackson's classic psychological thriller, *The Haunting of Hill House*, a character named Eleanor has the following psychotic episode: remembering the day's events as she tries to fall asleep, Eleanor finds herself staring at harsh shadows created by light hitting the surface irregularities of a crumbling plaster wall. Slowly, the shadows converge into what her imagination tells her is a scowling demon that grows more frightening as the seconds tick on. She imagines herself hearing voices, some of which sound like those of screaming children. As the face on the wall becomes more pronounced, reality and fantasy merge and grow confused. She screams.

Individuals with vivid imaginations often fantasize such images from the amorphous shapes of clouds, rock formations and patterned wallpaper. Psychologists call this phenomenon projection, and it can be applied with varying degrees of validity to all encounters of human consciousness with a "chaotic" sensory environment. To a large degree, projection is the stuff that mythology is made of, insofar as structures that we invent to explain reality to ourselves inevitably contain elements of wish fulfillment.

The paintings of Irving Marcus that are currently on exhibit at Joseph Chowning Gallery demonstrate a clever manipulation of the mechanism of projection. One looks at these works and sees at first glance a



Irving Marcus. *Shirt Pulling*, 1985, oil on canvas, 69"x 49-1/2", at Joseph Chowning Gallery, San Francisco.

structured collection of dynamic, multi-colored patterns that snake around the picture spaces. Looking a bit closer, one sees that these patterns divide themselves into smaller ones that exist in counterpoint to the larger areas, filling them with glowing squiggles of colorful form. Finally, one notices that these patterns flow together and interact in a way that articulates a phantasmagoric, hallucination-like scenario.

The scenarios that Marcus paints seem

comically absurdist, rather like a situation comedy in search of a plot. They are acted out by contorted figures that express a confused consciousness of their own disembodied state, as though discontented with their reality yet unable to do anything to improve it. They seem to struggle for some relationship to gravity so that they can gain bearing and direction. Like specimens in an aquarium, they navigate the perimeters of their situation in an agitated,

aimless way; their only struggle is the effort to sustain their identity as figures in the face of an encroaching ground that threatens to subsume all differentiated identity.

Most of Marcus's paintings are medium size or smaller, and that scale works well for his intentions. This size approximates that of an ordinary aquarium, and it invites viewers to enter the depicted reality in much the same way that they would enter

a Joseph Cornell box. Marcus pays a lot of attention to the specific value and chroma of his colors. With an eye to the way they mix optically by virtue of their proximity to one another, he achieves a measured resonance akin to that of impressionist painting. A large number of painters now strive to extrapolate a symbolic situation by the purely sensate means of color and texture (rather than by the more traditional means of linear delineation), but Marcus, who has been mining this vein longer than

most, has achieved complex results that imply more layers of interactive meaning.

These meanings range from the theme-and-variation inventiveness of his paintings' formal qualities to the anecdotal and allegorical implications of his depictions. A sense of terror and pathos seems to underlie the comic and colorful world that Marcus's paintings portray. Their essential spirit may be more interested in undermining aimlessness and frivolity than in participating in them, which is much to their credit.

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