

ART REVIEW

Wild Ride

Irving Marcus

Artist Irving Marcus is known for his colorful, narrative paintings, composed mostly of figurative imagery. But in *The Oakland Series: 1980-85* (on view at the Encina Art Gallery through Feb. 13), the emphasis is on drawings.

These images are rich in descriptive themes and provoke many complex ideas about the irony, joy and drama of life. Without the attractive, highly saturated hues that distinguish Marcus' acclaimed paintings, the bones and structure of his ideas are clearly revealed. This only enhances the complexity of his narrative tales, weaving them even further beneath layers below the surface of the picture plane. In the Oakland Series drawings, this is accomplished with graphite only, by rendering the images in similar tones of black and pale gray against white paper.

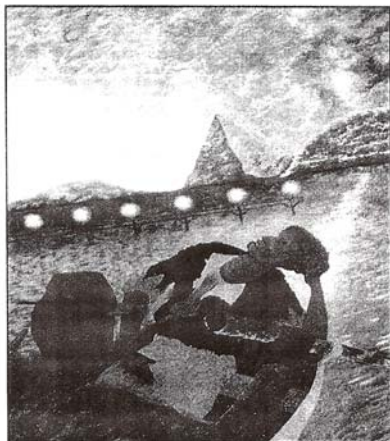
For the uninitiated, it helps to look at the Oakland Series from a distance, allowing the imagery to come into better focus. Discerning which aspect of the composition is being presented can be confusing; at first, sensations akin to vertigo and retina burns combine for a moment. But with closer observation, it is this intricate complexity that makes discovering his drawings such a great reward.

Consider Marcus' "Down To The Elbows." His characteristic use of graphite rendered on a similar tonal scale is present here, and also in "Xavier and Carmen." He creates a relationship of inside-to-outside in "Down To The Elbows" by using compositional components one usually associates with landscapes or still lifes.

These elements are mixed and then juxtaposed in concert with the main subject: a reclining man who leans wistfully on his elbows, upside down. The pleonastic components one expects within most compositions now support this odd mixture of familiar elements. This makes the horizon line hard to find; reality is being questioned, shifted and played with in a very basic way.

Now consider the oil pastels "Cinquante," "Quatorze" or "Fiente et Un," all from Marcus' *Recent Works In Color* show at Solomon Dubnick Gallery (through Jan. 30). The essential elements of landscape are portrayed in a highly expressive, abstract manner. Their composition is made of biomorphically shaped areas, which suggest a shifting or floating point of view—this time, almost solely through Marcus' use of color.

Marcus is often linked with the Chicago Imagists, a group of artists first identified as such in the early 1960s. Mike Stevens, director of the Encina Art Gallery, thinks the perception has gained strength from



"Estuary, 1997," oil on canvas, by Irving Marcus.

the association Marcus has with noted Chicago Imagist Jim Nutt (also a founding member of the "Harry Who" movement). The two artists worked together when Marcus, a professor and art department head at California State University, Sacramento, offered Nutt a teaching position.

Regardless of Marcus' media choice, the representational imagery in most of his work induces a floating effect for many viewers and is one of the most salient qualities that links him to Chicago Imagists' working methodologies. For example, Chicago Imagists Ed Paschke's lithograph "Ponderosa" features his hallmark use of highly saturated color and floating, truncated figures within narrative compositions.

Critics have said Marcus' work has a beautiful plasticity to it, exhibiting aspects of both abstract expressionism and minimalism—a theory his color work at Solomon Dubnick confirms. However, mannerisms from the color field school of painting seem to have influenced his work as well.

Marcus appears to take great pleasure in flipping imagery in his narrative tales and incorporates a great deal of humor. His work takes us for a topsy-turvy trip, echoing the reality of life's ups and downs. He can take me for a roller-coaster ride any time.

—KIMI JULIAN

The Oakland Series: 1980-85 is on view at Encina Art Gallery (1400 Bell St., 971-5881) through Feb. 13, and Recent Works in Color is at Solomon Dubnick Gallery through Jan. 30. Call 920-4547 for more information.