

Palo Alto Cultural Center

Modern Allegories



Jan Wex, "CIRCUS SERIES #1" (1984), oil on canvas



John Farnsworth, "610-0888 90810" (1984), acrylic on canvas

East Gallery

November 10 - January 19, 1986

MODERN ALLEGORIES

"...the most obvious fact of contemporary life is the rapidity of change."

Robert Hutchins, The Sacred Grove, 1967.

We are made increasingly aware of the rapidity of change in contemporary life through television and video, which create a sense of instant history by documenting everyday events. Because the news media report, but do not really interpret, we often understand the significance of events, artifacts, and relationships between people and objects only in retrospect. The context of a subject, which is so important to its interpretation, may be eliminated in periods of rapid change and development. For this reason, perhaps the best source of information about the significance of current lifestyles for future generations will come through the work of painters such as Jan Wurm and John Hannaford.

"The uniqueness of the experience of looking at a painting repeatedly over a period of days or years," according to John Berger, "is that, in the midst of flux, the image remains changeless. Of course the significance of the image may change, as a result of historical or personal events, but what is depicted is unchanging."¹

Both Hannaford and Wurm view the geographic and social terrain with an eye for detail. They are involved with the particulars of their environment and their own culture. Through their work we realize that environment is more than just the frame in which we develop historic relevance; it is the place that forms the history and the relevance. Since both artists draw from personal experience, their work often represents a microcosm of the contemporary cultural environment. If the work increases our self-understanding, then they have succeeded in interpreting the experience in a universal way.

Their choice of subjects indicate that Wurm and Hannaford share points of common awareness in surveying the contemporary scene. The story, concept, or idea underlying the images presented to us are drawn from daily experience. Although both artists paint similar subjects, their style and voice differ. We are aware of two distinct points of view on the subject of relationships within society, and on the objects and events which draw our attention to their significance.

Berkeley artist Jan Wurm uses expressive, abstract figures to illustrate real life situations. Wurm concentrates on the inner tensions of relationships in her

¹ John Berger, And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos, 1984, p. 25.

work. The silent gestures, color, design, and scale of the figures reveal their inner nature. The more obvious facial expressions are often caricatured. Each painting reveals different levels of exchange: between young and old, audience and performer, men and women, family members. Wurm details and varies the environment of her paintings, providing her characters with a context for interpretation. Color is often an indicator of time and place, tables and lamps are mementos from childhood, blank mirrors indicate loneliness or emptiness. The viewer sees both interior and exterior views, which are often the public and private aspects of a relationship.

Napa artist John Hannaford is more specific in his concern. His work takes the objects, rituals and attitudes of middle class Californian suburbanites as its subject. The paintings document leisure and recreational activities which Hannaford enjoys and participates in. While elements of the work are photo-realistic, Hannaford builds his paintings like collages: mixing texture, color, shape, and content in layers. He has defined the range of his themes and set the abstract and realistic limits of his painting style in order to create the necessary context for allegory. Hannaford draws from many sources to create that context: advertising images, snap-shot photography, postcards. His simplified treatment of forms and self-framing borders show the influence of these sources. The snap-shot format, in particular, is a familiar form of visual narrative. Hannaford's penchant for collaging images of objects is most apparent in his use of small tokens bordering the paintings. Although they add a decorative element, Hannaford uses the objects to symbolize aspects of the collective personality of the materially affluent social group portrayed in the central image.

In MODERN ALLEGORIES the images painted by Jan Wurm and John Hannaford reflect some basic truths about America today. While these artists can be seen as translators of experience, providing a context for significant cultural phenomena, their purpose is not necessarily political. However, we are reminded that art is more than just a visual experience. The re-interpretation of the mundane or commonplace can provide a catalyst for change, a context for tradition.

Dyana Chadwick
Curator
Palo Alto Cultural Center
November 1985

JOHN HANNAPORD

Born:

California, 1950.

Studied:

Calif. State U., Sacramento,
M.A. 1976.

Sonoma State U., Rohnert Park,
B.A. 1972.

Teaching:

Napa Valley College, Napa,
1980-present.

Sonoma State U., Rohnert Park,
1981.

Solo Exhibitions:

1985 - Glendale College, Fine
Art Gallery, L.A.

1985 - Creative Arts Center
of Northern Calif.,
George Orberg Gallery,
Chico, CA.

1984 - Univ. of Nevada, Reno,
Manville Gallery.

1981 - Montalvo Center for
the Arts, Saratoga.

JAN WURM

Born:

New York City, 1951.

Studied:

Univ. of Calif., Los Angeles,
B.A. 1972.

Royal College of Art, London,
M.A.R.C.A. 1975.

Awards:

Clifton Webb Scholarship
1971-72.

Solo Exhibitions:

1985 - Reed Whipple Cultural
Center Art Gallery,
Las Vegas.

1983 - New Space, New College
of Calif., S.F.

1981 - Arizona State Univ.,
Union Gallery, Tempe.

1980 - Saddleback College,
Mission Viejo, CA.

1980 - Southern Exposure
Gallery, S.F.

1979 - Foothill College, CA.

1978 - L.A. Municipal Art
Gallery.