

ART

# ART; Social Commentary Expressed In a Mom and Pop Gallery

By Vivien Raynor

March 28, 1993

18 THE NEW YORK TIMES MARCH 28, 1993

### Social Commentary Expressed In a Mom and Pop Gallery

BY VIVIAN RAYNOR

**C**heerful, colorful and often satirical, the art of the Mom and Pop Gallery is a reflection of the times. The gallery, which opened in Manhattan last year, has become a haven for artists who use their work to comment on the social and political issues of the day.



The gallery's collection includes works by Virginia Johnson, a self-portrait by the artist, and a series of paintings by the artist, which are a series of fun and the ambience of a city gallery.

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CRITICS are sometimes accused of reviewing a gallery as much as its show -- and with some justification. But when the display is at a space like the Prezant Art Gallery here, it is impossible to discuss one without the other. After all, the gallery is in a house that, poised above its garage in the front and a small garden behind, is occupied by the owners, Jack and Toby Prezant, who refer to the gallery as a mom and pop operation.

Then there is the interior, which is a maze of rooms and passages leading to a well-appointed kitchen giving onto a glass-enclosed porch. That the walls are lined with paintings (mostly by Mr. Prezant) and books in no way detracts from the sensation of being in a miniature casbah. But this may simply be because of the low-light living room, which, in retrospect, seems to be all cushions and an Oriental rug.

As usual, the exhibition begins outside this room in the hall and continues upstairs to the gallery proper. It features Victoria Salzman, David A. Baskin and Wyona Diskin, all of them new to this observer despite their previous appearances in New York City and in the outlying areas.

A painter and printmaker, Ms. Salzman focuses on grotesquerie the likes of which can be seen most evenings on the boulevards of lower Manhattan and particularly during the Wigstock Festival on the Lower East Side. With a prismatic palette, the artist paints her subjects in full fig, which often means little more than a headdress and jewelry.

But what these cartoon figures lack in clothing they make up for in pink, green or purple flesh and the occasional mask. They caper three or four to a glistening white canvas -- more in the case of the diptych, "That Outfit Is Just Tutu."

It is hard to tell if the titles represent further comment on the scene or are quotes lifted from overheard conversations (the artist tends bar in TriBeCa). Still, there is no doubt that while 2 or 3 are fun, 15 are a deterrent to appreciating the images. Social comment is worthless unless sharpened by wit, as Daumier proved; but it can die a dreadful death under a barrage of vaudeville jokes.

Ms. Salzman has the reserves of bile needed for successful satire. This is particularly clear in the black-and-white etchings, like the one of milling nudes and skeletons -- an orgy entitled "The Singles Scene Can Really Be Hell for Some People."

And, in the print of naked visitors to a rural prison peering through the bars at the occupants, who are also naked, there is even some pathos.

But there the artist goes again with her titles, this one "My Johnny Never Meant to Kill All Those People, He Was Only Having a Bad Day."

David A. Baskin has worked with sculptors like Reuben Kadish and Peter Agostini and has acted as assistant to Louise Bourgeois. He also knows his way around special effects studios, notably the one contributing to the recent "Back to the Future" movie. His own output falls into two categories: cement reliefs, two to three feet high, and small bronzes.

Both reliefs are abstractions, but one has figural implications and is touched here and there with color, mostly yellow, blue and green, and is inlaid with a few irregular stone shapes.

The modeling in both is vigorous, and the effect is of a deeply incised wood block from which a bold expressionistic print might well be pulled.

The bronzes, too, are abstractions with recognizable elements. Two are variations on a chair: the one titled "Aztec Heart" has flanges and a suggestion of an aorta at the top, and there are plaques incorporating Picasso-esque horses. "Campanile" is supposed to be a bell tower.

Mr. Baskin may work until he achieves a parallel with reality or he may simply take reality and run with it. Either way, the approach sometimes leads him into overly busy compositions and at other times into a well-balanced mass like that suggesting a pile of acrobats -- and the art of Jacques Lipchitz.

Seemingly Wyona Diskin starts with a monotype, then builds up the image, layer upon layer, adding imprints of burlap or else a wrinkled mass of tissue.

Disks, rectangles and trapezoids overlap or abut on each other; the colors -- intense reds, greens, blues and black -- are applied alternately opaque and transparent, glossy and matte.

The best is an image resembling the silhouette of a head and shoulders that is predominantly red and plum colored but split down the middle by a crack of bright green.

"Evocations," as the show is called, seems crowded, but, as already indicated, the atmosphere is informal enough to make visitors feel they have all the time in the world -- at least until the closing date, April 11.

