

# ROAD SHOW

## Ken Bernstein,

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The visions of everyday life in the work of Ken Bernstein, 26-year-old figurative painter of street scenes and interiors with people, overcome the banality of modern existence.

Bernstein's paintings of people perfunctorily conducting their daily affairs are visual extrapolations of his own routine existence, he says, but his work is universal in its psychological impact.

The irony in his work is only understood upon reflection. We are forced to think about and question the meaning of scenes before us. For Bernstein, soliciting the disarmed gaze is what he hopes to accomplish—and does. His curious use of imagination and his application of color, perspective, and psychological impact confounds the viewer at first and beckons him to search for the reasons why. His urban scenes of bustling intersections, sidewalk strollers, a rainy night at a city crossroads, and of isolated tenant dwellers weighed down with the burdens of their stuck-in-the-rut existence, cause us to recall and ponder.

A measure of fatalism in the stare and stance of Bernstein's subjects says that their predicaments are inescapable. Bernstein does not qualify this, his subjects' plight, but rather hones in on it even more forcibly with his use of color. Well, his suburbanites may be trapped in their mundane existence, yet they are not depressed or without hope. The viewer too is deep in reflection—unraveling the interaction of the subjects—comparing himself to them. This interplay is precisely what the artist set us up for. "I chose to paint things that are familiar to me, because my memory is filled with visions of my everyday life. For example, walking down the street, going to a restaurant, or to a bar, playing a video game, or just plain waiting in line," Bernstein says.

Despite the depiction of his subjects living ordinary, if not repetitious lives, Bernstein almost makes them heroes. They may be acting out rehearsed roles, but his subjects have learned to cope and accept the state of things. It is like a game of Russian roulette where his subjects nonchalantly go along with the game, but appear ever mindful that the next turn of the cylinder may be the one with the bang.

Bernstein's adept use of color and light does much for creating the mood and psychological underpinning of his paintings. Renderings of night scenes, where darker tones of greens and blues predominate, are richer in psychological impact than those with light tones. This perhaps may be his one shortcoming, but where bright tones are used in day scenes Bernstein does exceedingly well in blending a Matissean palette of colors.

"What I'm interested in in my painting is the effect of light on the environment and how the light, its colors, and its intensity affect human behavior. I'm also interested in the psychological relationships between people who know each other and between those who do not. For example, in one of my paintings the main source of light comes from the television. The light from the television models the forms of a man sitting in a chair drinking from a can of beer, his nude wife is sprawled on the couch and their daughter is kneeling in front of her mother, staring at the T.V. set. The event is created from my imagination combining memory, logic, and visualization. I simplify the color harmonies so they straddle the world of the way things look in reality—yet keeping the viewer aware that they are looking at a painting. I'm not

trying to lie to anybody that this is an actual event, but then again," Bernstein says.

During his school days at the Maryland Institute College of Art Bernstein became interested in exploring the direction his art is now in. "I started out backwards from contemporary to figure painting when I started college. In college, I was told to draw the figure and I could not do it. It was a challenge and I realized that to draw representationally you had to understand what you're looking at. So I started to understand forms and figure. I studied the bones and muscles. And during the summers of 1976 through 1979 I spent my time at the Cape School of Art in Provincetown, where I painted 5 or 6 still lifes a day in changing light. Well, there I learned to see with color. That was my formal art training. After college I spent a good deal of time teaching art to kids over a two-year period. I learned a lot about human nature, psychology, and human development. My painting after that point changed from something more formal, like still lifes, to what I'm doing now. By formal I also mean directly representation—that is painting directly from life to out of my imagination. I had difficulty with painting still lifes that had psychological impact," says Bernstein.

Setting up the proper visual perspective is important in obtaining the overall mood Bernstein wants. His use of multiple perspectives and color when compared to other elements, such as form and light, which at times appear weak, are masterfully done.

"Forms are simplified to emphasize their gesture and positionality in space. Hence, the scenes in my paintings can be viewed from several different sight-angles simultaneously, so that moments appear to be frozen in time. This is accomplished through the use of multiple perspectives within a single scene. This technique allows me to portray the human figures in my work as though taken out of the normal space/time continuum, and unaware of the viewer," says Bernstein.

In one particular green-toned painting of an intersection on a rainy evening, the lamp-lit buildings and thoroughfare, the busy glass-enclosed cafe, and the strollers in the foreground all vie for equal attention. Of it Bernstein says, "In the distance we're looking head on at the figures, but in the foreground we're looking down at a car. In the middle ground we're looking into the cafe on the left. In the cafe you're looking up into the light of the cafe and at the same time you see the floor and the people's legs under the table. In the top of the painting you see the top of buildings and the sky."

"My use of perspective has been influenced by El Greco and Paul Cezanne's use of shifting perspectives. The reason I use the multiple perspective is because it removes painting from an earth-bound single point view of reality, to a spiritual world where one can be several places at the same time. A lot of the paintings are viewed from above, looking down, creating a spiritual perspective," Bernstein says.

Recently, Bernstein exhibited his work at the Zachaeus Soup Kitchen in a group show. The exhibition was an attempt by the artists to bring work to a new environment to be seen by people who ordinarily would not be exposed to it. Bernstein's work will be exhibited at Gallerie Wayland House on December 8 through December 31. He is currently showing at the Anton Gallery through January 5.

Bernstein's work evokes contemplation on things we often take for granted. Once you view his work that "walk down the street" or "stand in line" may never be the same again. "In these everyday events, it's like looking through binoculars backwards at myself: I'm trying to discover my relationship to the world by making myself small and seeing how I fit in the world," concludes Bernstein.

by J.P. Passinault