

ARTFORUM

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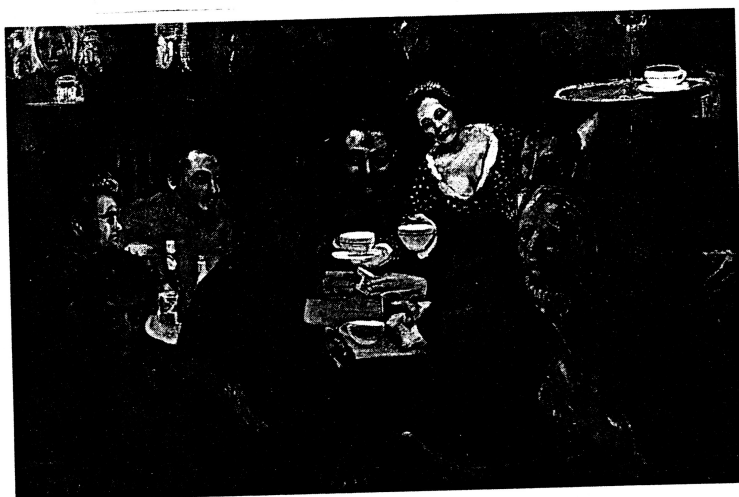
REVIEWS

PAUL GEORGES

CENTER FOR FIGURATIVE PAINTING

Paul Georges wants to paint "The Big Idea," as the title of his miniretrospective indicates, and the big idea (as in "What's the big idea?") turns out to be Georges himself. Tall, slightly overweight Georges cuts a big, full figure, and he appears in work after work, sometimes glowering confrontationally in an eccentric space (*Self-Portrait in Studio*, 1959), sometimes sitting comfortably in a familiar space (*Cedar Tavern*, 1973–74), undisturbed by the curious spectator. So the big idea is Me, but Georges takes his own narcissism with a grain of salt as large as his own outside ego. There is a peculiarly comic awkwardness to his paintings, with self-deprecation (if not exactly modesty) balancing self-assertion. The awkwardness sometimes seems calculated and stagy, but at its best his painterliness has the same complicated instinctive resonance—conveys the same sense of concentrated passion—as, say, Marsden Hartley's. Georges, after all, belongs to the old school: He is concerned to celebrate the life force—a big idea indeed—not to make so-called idea art, whose ideas often turn out to be less interesting than their art hype makes them appear.

In fact, it is the sense of life observed and experienced, recorded and deeply felt, that gives Georges's paintings their charismatic intimacy. Depicting himself and his idiosyncratic artist pals and their friends enjoying themselves at the Cedar Tavern, he captures a marvelous vitality (and inspires wonder at the fact that they didn't competitively pummel each other to death). Again and again a sense of community informs Georges's works, reminding us that the art world was not always the artificial construction it sometimes seems to have become.



Paul Georges, *Cedar Tavern*, 1973–74,
oil on linen, 57½ x 94¾".

Georges takes the personal and the private for granted—another big (if nostalgic) idea these days. He may strut his grandiosity, but he wears it as a symbol of his pride in belonging to a creatively lively community. His paintings convey the sense that the studio is a warm sanctuary apart from a cold society—a long way from Courbet's studio, into which the whole world crowded as fodder for his art.

A friendly sort of sensuality, not the clinically detached kind that seems to be the media model, is Georges's other big idea. His naked models are relaxed and cozy with one another. They give the impression of wanting to be together, not of having been positioned there for aesthetic reasons, as Philip Pearlstein's or Robert Mapplethorpe's models seem to have been. Georges's figures have stories to tell, and their bodies seem to have personality, rather than simply being more or less abstract objects. His pictures are casually autobiographical; his life and art are intimately connected, which is why, after all, he finally seems more a mensch than a megalomaniac.

—Donald Kuspit