

March 13, 1980



"The Last Washington Painting," by Alan Sonneman

'Metarealities': Pretty Perversion and Bureaucrat Brushwork

By Paul Richard

Manon Cleary's red-eyed rats are as large as you are. James Bumgardner's dogs are floating in the air. A naked woman stands in William Newman's pool; octopi and squid swim about her legs.

These locally made paintings, currently on view at the Washington Project for the Arts, 1227 G St. NW, are creepy, but peculiarly conventional. They call to mind this town. Even when they deal with the most disturbing subjects, with monsters and disasters, they dress as blandly as bureaucrats. Their brushwork remains placid; their surfaces are calm.

The most curious thing about this curious exhibition is that it does not shock. Its big pot bellied birds, chest-beating gorillas and Victorian ladies without legs or arms are at least as pretty as they are perverse.

The show is called "Metarealities." Unlike the surrealists, these seven metarealists do not deal with nightmares, do not explore the womb or tomb, and, save for Joseph Shannon, do not paint with passion.

Of the many well-made pictures here, perhaps the most serene is one by Alan Sonneman which unexcitedly predicts the destruction of this city. Called "The Last Washington Painting," it shows an H-bomb going off (prettily, if truth be told) above downtown D.C.

"Metarealities" was selected by Nina Felshin, an experienced curator thoroughly familiar with the art of Washington. Her show, unlike so many, is more than just a grab bag of "realist" pictures. It has a point to make. "Until now," she writes, "there has been no effort in Washington, D.C., traditionally known for its achievements in abstract painting, to distinguish among the kinds of realist art practiced by its painters." Her little exhibition attempts to do just that.

Lisa Brotman, James Bumgardner, Manon Cleary, Margarida Kendall, William Newman, Joe Shannon and Alan Sonneman do not compose a

school, but they do share something—a preference, for example, for incongruous situations and bizarre juxtapositions, for animals who seem to live comfortably with people, and for oil paints. "They are attempting," Felshin writes, "to cast a spell over reason."

In Washington this sort of art has a curious pedigree. These paintings bring to mind such California artists of the 1960s as Bill Martin and Gage Taylor, and such local intermediaries as Shelia Rose and Jonathan Meader who, while working in this city, helped link the two coasts. The photograph and the collage have influenced these pictures. Felshin mentions, too, the art of Ed McGowin, whose enigmatic airbrush drawings of the early '70s helped to bridge "the seemingly enormous gap between the concerns of abstract color painting and narrative realism."

The term "metarealities," she notes, was first used in this city by the five young artists, Newman and Brotman among them, who showed together here as "The Color Pencil School" at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1973.

This show is coherent, and that is a great virtue. But it is also flawed. Bumgardner and Brotman still seem, at least to me, painters of the second rank. Newman's works are cluttered. Kendall's work is admirable, though the images she invents and the stories she tells us are far more impressive than the rather wooden way in which she paints.

Of the painters represented, Cleary, Shannon and Sonneman are the most accomplished. Sonneman is a rather straightforward photo realist; Cleary is a photo lyricist; Shannon is obedient both to photos and Degas. If Sonneman paints prose and Cleary eerie verse, Shannon shows us shrieks.

Felshin, with this show, has begun to bring some curatorial order to Washington's non-abstract painting. It is about time. A local portrait show is long overdue. So, too, is an exhibit of landscapes done here. This fantastical exhibit, which might have been larger and crisper, will close March 28.