

The Washington Post

'Tough Realism' at GWU

by Pamela Kessler, October 23, 1987

"TOUGH REALISM" brings to mind whatever you want to avoid thinking about. Ethiopia, needlemarks, autopsies, the stock market, parasites from sushi.

"Tough Realism" is what Dimock Gallery at George Washington University calls its current invitational show. And although it's a more provocative departure for this gallery, the show fortunately doesn't quite live up to its name. The artists aren't so tough they make us look away (which, for most people, is perfectly okay). Instead they entice us to keep looking, and looking.

The centerpiece of the show is Fred Folsom's "Last Call." The huge, three-panel panorama transports you to the Shepherd Park Go-Go Club. You're standing in the middle of the scum of the earth mixed with the salt: A drifter with "HATE" spelled out on his knuckles. A stripper daydreaming of her own after-hours, not including the grey-faced men who leer at her. Spilled beer, bandaids in odd places, loose dollar bills, empty bottles. Noise and cigarette smoke. A pleasant Joe College, out of place, you know the type, button-down next to the punk in the dirty Kiss T-shirt. Set 'em up, Igor.

But while it seems semi-tough on the surface - you can identify with the pregnant woman in a trenchcoat, who takes solace from the St. Pauli Girl poster by the door, as her amused husband phones AAA - there is an undercurrent of sensitivity, a basic sort of tenderness that is the artist's. His bar scene is not violent, like those of neo-expressionist Jorg Immendorff; nor are his people scenes as funny as those of Red Grooms.

Folsom's preponderance of "types" says that the "Last Call" is about us. And no one notices that the Giant Screen over the bar is announcing: ABC NEWS SPECIAL REPORT.

This Bud's for you.

It's an amazing piece of grand-scale work; it took Folsom four years; it was worth it.

Overall, the show brings together mainly local artists' work, some of it from the school's collection. A self-portrait of Manon Cleary says that smoking is not pretty. But outside, the decay of cities is tougher art. There are ashcan images of urban blight. Robert Birmelin's "Fire on Seventh Avenue" came from the sky or was set, an impending riot, with an angled viewpoint that makes you feel you're running into it. And Rebecca Davenport (who appears, by the way, as a "character" in Folsom's piece) recreates a trompe l'oeil bit of scarred wall, post-no-bills ignored. Repeated images of Mona Lisa, of all people, reminding us that art can be found in the strangest places.

Sidney Goodman's "The Pool," another involving piece of work, depicts the potential anomie and isolation of modern life. The swimming pool, usually a scene of adults basking and kids hollering, is Kafkaesque here. The lifeguard, the swimmer, the man at the picnic table stare morosely out from the dreariest days. The pleasant garden wall swallows up a woman sitting by the pool. And how was your summer vacation?

"Tough Realism" will be at the Dimock Gallery through November 5. The gallery is off the lower lounge of Lisner Auditorium, 21st and H streets NW, and hours are Tuesday through Friday 10 to 5, Saturday noon to 5.

Things get a little tougher with Mark Sisson's "Hazardous to Your Health," on view at Galerie Triangle. The idea of multicolored woodcuts and monoprints is tame enough. This Wisconsin artist's fine draftsmanship is inspiring. But how do you feel about knives, guns and chains?

Take "Tough Boys," a monoprint of fully armed punks. If you love the colors (vivid, vibrant and bizarre) and you love the patterns (faces striped as if by light through narrow shutters; stripes and plaids for skin, or tattoos - "Rough Boy, Rough Boy . . ."), you still have to get past the subject matter.

Sadists meet sadists; everyone's got a weapon if only a pencil behind the ear. Things go from bad to worse in the woodcut, "Herr Doktor Mengele I Presume." You begin to wonder about Mr. Sisson. But his subject matter is usually more traditional, and this is just a series. He's not weird, he just reads the paper like everyone else. And in effect he's posing questions of social responsibility.

"Hazardous to Your Health" will be at Galerie Triangle, 3701 14th Street NW, through November. Hours are 2 to 6, Tuesday through Saturday.

M.P. Curtis photographs things and places that by any measure should be thought ugly, and makes them beautiful - a hydroelectric plant and a men's room, for instance.

Imagine what he can do with a little basic material. Our own Dumbarton Oaks, for example, becomes a Palladian villa, and though you have wandered these paths, they never looked like this. When he uses infrared film, the leafy trees burst into lush blossom, and glow. His soft, painterly landscape photography is reminiscent of the work of the Pictorialists at the turn of the century.

In other photos, Curtis finds objects, like the empty wicker wheelchair on the breezeway, that say more about people in their absence. His people are mythical shadows, a figure haunting a room in a farmhouse, fleeing past the window, escaping from what, into what? Curtis seems to search out those phantasmic moments between events.

Photos by M.P. Curtis will be on display at the Martin Gallery, 1609 Connecticut Ave. NW, through November 5. Hours are 11 to 6 Wednesday through Saturday.