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ART REVIEW

Marginal Areas of New York City's Landscape

By PEPE KARMEL

In the movies, New York City is usually evoked by a short list of instantly recognizable monuments: the spire of the Empire State Building, the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the upraised torch of the Statue of Liberty. Film makers like to set private moments on the tree-lined side streets of the Upper West Side or the paths of Central Park. Traffic moving slowly down Second Avenue signals the passage of time.

It's probably significant that none of these familiar scenes are represented in "New York Now: Contemporary Cityscape Paintings," at the Museum of the City of New York. The 24 artists selected from the museum's collection by Jan Seidler Ramirez, the curator of painting and sculpture, prefer, on the whole, to evoke the city through seemingly marginal areas: the meat markets around Gansevoort Street in the West Village or the tenements of Washington Heights, a deli on Delancey Street on the Lower East Side or a luncheonette in Hell's Kitchen. Ambition, pride and tenderness are out; grit and desolation are in.

The model for many of these pictures seems to be Edward Hopper's 1930 canvas "Early Sunday Morning," with its row of banal shopfronts beneath red-brick windows rendered strangely poetic by the wan sunlight that falls almost horizontally into the empty street. (This picture is currently on view in the Hopper exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.) The composition of Frederick Brown's "West 14th Street," painted in 1989, is centered on a red-brick warehouse in the distance, beyond a vast expanse of asphalt. But the scene is flooded with light, and the dull warehouse facade vibrates with unspoken significance beneath a brilliant blue sky.

Museum of the City of New York

A detail from "The Ballroom" (1976), a mural-sized oil by Marion Pinto.

In John R. Murray 2d's 1987 picture "No Parking/98 Greene St.," the play of light and shadow transforms a rusty cast-iron facade, scarred with strips of long-gone posters, into a dramatic setting like that of a 17th-century Baroque altarpiece: all that's missing is the saint. Mr. Brown's and Mr. Murray's pictures are both oversize watercolors, capitalizing on the medium's inherent luminosity.

Lorraine Shemesh's "Afternoon in May," a 1982 oil painting, works a Hopperesque transformation on the pink-tan facade of a modern apartment house rising above the yawning maw of a garage entrance on East 82d Street. This is the sort of building that does its best to destroy the character of New York's side streets; its blank, Los Angeles-style architecture is emphasized by the contrast with the brownstones surrounding it. Charles Ford's "10th Avenue Luncheonette," done in 1988, is a skillful essay in the Photo Realist style of Richard Estes, Hopper's most important descendant; Mr. Estes himself is not represented in the exhibition.

The most interesting variations on the Hopper model are provided by Ann Goth Werner. A 1978 painting of "The Ridgewood Savings Bank," with its arched windows, marble walls and Byzantine chandeliers, recalls the days when banks were solemn institutions, not the financial equivalents of fast-food outlets. Similarly, the elegant, shady "Interior of Fresh Pond Crematory" provides a reminder that the funeral parlor was once a central part of every community, and the undertaker a leading citizen.

One painter, Philip Reisman, goes back beyond Hopper to the styles of John Sloan and the Ashcan School. His 1978 canvas "Red Wall II" depicts a multi-racial group of friends hanging out on a street corner by a convenience store. There's a hydrant running, and a car with its front end up on a crate for a tire change. The figures are drawn in a simplified, slightly cartoonish style, but the surrounding tenements are meticulously characterized, with their panoply of ornamental stonework, zigzagging chimneys and television antennas.

The style of Marcia Clark's 1984 canvas "Gray Morning" seems to look back to Weimar Republic painters like Max Beckmann and Ludwig Meidner (themselves fascinated with the big-city image of New York). Ms. Clark's canvas offers a vertiginous overhead view of downtown from the Woolworth Building to the Manhattan Bridge. The buildings jab upward like a forest of knives, colored with slashes of gray, blue and brown.

Other canvases draw on the formal language of the 1950's. Max Arthur Cohen's "Cityscape," a 1975 oil, uses a late Cubist style, with large areas of flat color overscored by a nervous grid of black lines, to depict a stretch of West 42d Street centering on the old McGraw-Hill Building. In Sarah Slotkin's 1986 view of the "Independent Subway Line," the arched ceiling dissolves into squares of pure color, floating above the blocky figures of passengers on the platforms and a repairman on the tracks: the picture looks like a collaboration between Nicholas de Stael and David Park. The brightly colored, thickly impastoed smears and squiggles of Philip Sherwood's "Pussycat Theater," painted in 1982, recall the early work of Al Held and Joan Mitchell.

If the artistic development of the 1960's and 70's seems slighted by the exhibition, it is in part because painters of cityscapes tended to look back to earlier styles, and in part because the museum simply couldn't afford to buy canvases by well-known artists like Mr. Estes, Richard Haas and Red Grooms. In Mr. Grooms's absence, such movements as funk and decoration are represented by a single canvas, Nedra Newby's "Murder on Clinton Street," from 1982.

Ms. Newby's canvas combines a schematic map of the Lower East Side, drawn in colored lines on a black background, and a cartoonlike drawing of herself crumpled on the pavement, with her dog standing watch over her body. The bands of the streets and avenues are filled with lettering, repeating their names and offering commentary on drug dealers and famous artists. A wall label notes that Ms. Newby has since left New York, avoiding the fate depicted in her painting.

Marion Pinto's mural-sized canvas, "The Ballroom," offers a more optimistic view of the downtown scene. The Ballroom, originally at 458 West Broadway, was an important fixture of the SoHo scene that emerged in the 1970's. In 1976, its owners commissioned this view of their bar and dining room, peopled with a group of art-world luminaries, including the artists Alex Katz, Marisol and Larry Rivers; the dealers Ivan Karp, Paula Cooper and Louis Meisel, and the critics John Perreault and Michael Goldstein. The painting, which was based on photographs, is no great shakes artistically. But it vividly evokes an artistic scene that seems to have slipped without warning out of the newspapers and into the history books.

"New York Now: Contemporary Cityscape Paintings" remains at the Museum of the City of New York, Fifth Avenue at 103d Street, through Dec. 31. During this period, the museum plans to offer a changing selection of cityscapes from its collection.