

JEFF WAY

A mask maker and costume designer with a background in Dada performance, Jeff Way delights in assuming different roles and poses, often simultaneously. Satire is mixed in his paintings with reverence and vision, shamanism with side-show funk. Way's art is about transformation and a general revving up of the imagination.

A floor to ceiling painting of Fred Astaire walking (or dancing?) with his son sets the tone for Way's recent exhibition. Astaire has three arms and the child, four. The dancer's two right arms hold hands with the child's two left arms. The tot's second torso grows out of his original head. As the figures float on a white field, the yellow, green, and red stripes of their clothes coalesce into a target. The juxtaposition of modernist and mass cultural imagery is as jarring as the atomic looniness of the transformed figures is creepy. And, though it may seem beside the point, the painting is well painted. The white field surrounding the figures is rich and dense, with an animating touch any number of abstract painters would love to get into their inert, monochromatic surfaces. *Fred and Son* (1979) is a restless, terrific painting. Ideas and associations fly off it like sparks.

Adjacent to *Fred and Son* is *Blue Hank* (1980), a life-size painting of the great country singer, Hank Williams, decked out in a classic white stage suit with music notes on the lapels and staves running the length of the trousers. His cowboy hat barely contains the composite head crooning into a double-mike. His three arms cradle his double-necked guitar. The entire figure is surrounded by a cheesy blue stage-light. Nothing is distorted—*bent* is a better word. Williams and Astaire, at work and play respectively, are transformed into show-biz legends for the mutant class.

These composite figures are extensions of Way's "head" paintings, exhibited last year. Originating in the re-assembling of four photographs of a subject shot from different angles, they were painted in acidic, expressionistic colors that would look good on a bruise. While it was almost impossible not to recall Francis Bacon's deliberate mutilations of his subjects



Jeff Way, Study for Buffalo Bull, 1979. Oil on canvas, 15 1/2 x 14". Courtesy Pam Adler Gallery.

(also using photographs as a source), Way's paintings transcended any expectations of angst. The augmented heads seemed to be at peace with themselves. There was little violence in Way's paint handling; it was applied with the deliberate care and affection of a make-up artist. This exotic calm carries over into the new paintings. Despite the figures' scald-tinted skin, the net effect of their presence is one of a dumb sweetness.

But Way is capable of his own violence, instructive and tempered by a shark-tooth irony. In *Hisstory of Painting (After Catlin)* of 1979, packs of white wolves attack and gore two buffalo. At the far right of the painting men resembling body-painted tribesmen gather around a third buffalo, painted as a flat, burnt silhouette on the grass. The painted men could be hunters, judging from the lances protruding from the buffalo's shape, and they appear to be engaged in some kind of ritual dance.

Hisstory of Painting can be

read as a funny, virulent commentary on the art world (how many times has an established male artist, possibly past his prime, been referred to as an "old bull"?), but is elegiac and reaffirming as well. The painting is based on three George Catlin panels in the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C. Way's extensive borrowing from Catlin is in itself a resurrection of dormant imagery. And again, the quality of Way's paint handling and pictorial construction, the explosive, hallucinatory sky obliterating any need for deep space, and the depth of the paint's narrative all leave little question of Way's seriousness and continued faith in the medium.

If many of the sources for Way's imagery are eclectic, others are downright hermetic. In *Made Style Brutally Strong* (1979), a monstrous, pointillist ape looms out of a wall of fire clutching a torn-off human foot. The ape and the run-together title of the paint-

ing come from a shoe box on which the ape is depicted tearing at a sneaker. Also written on the box was the slogan "in-everyway." Scrawled across the painting, it infuses the ape with an id-ish significance. The development of meaning is enhanced by the image's resemblance to Goya's horrifying painting of Saturn devouring his children. The foot is a Way icon, popping up in his pictures all over the place.

It is the narrative and associative aspects of Way's art that compels one to interpret. Yet *Buffalo Bull* (1979) communicates on a more symbolic plane despite its traceable sources and associations with hunting and ritual. Based on a Catlin painting of an American Indian hunter, La-Doo-Ke-A (roughly translated, Buffalo Bull), the painting depicts a seated figure clothed only in skins or blankets and holding a bow and red-tipped arrow. His upper torso and head are painted red and the rest of his body is ghostly white. On his otherwise blank face a buffalo's head is painted, also blank. A larger head is painted on his chest. The black and gray background is slathered on like Abstract-Expressionist frosting. It's a ghost image, an homage to the vanished, projecting a brooding presence.

Irony cushions most of the shock of Way's paintings, but the visionary grimness of the small *Painting for the Seventies* (1980) certainly provides a visceral jolt. A white-haired androgynous figure is tormented by lightning bolts, snakes, and a dragon's head. A three-blade scythe appears from between the figure's legs and, in the upper right, a white bird is impaled on a tree branch. It is a nightmarish little editorial, an updated Temptation of St. Anthony without the sex.

That the encyclopedic breadth of Way's eclecticism could produce imagery of such unexpectedness and vitality is a small miracle. He is a catalytic artist who works to smudge and obscure the fixed battle lines of classified style and historical position. As long as he is around, no subject is safely off limits or sleeping untroubled in some art historian's mausoleum. Way reacquaints us with the power of narrative painting to make the mute speak and to raise the dead. (Pam Adler, April 1-May 10)

Stephen Westfall