

# Every lawn a king; every man, isolated

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Record Art Critic

Being an artist in the suburbs has its own kind of struggle about it, as the following anecdote illustrates:

An artist friend from New York went back to his hometown in suburban New Jersey to draw some of the beautiful park landscapes he remembered from childhood. It was the middle of the day on a weekday, and the park was virtually empty. The view he was sketching was an open field, a stand of trees, and, beyond that, a line of houses that abutted the park. The artist had been drawing for about an hour when he was approached by a policeman.

"May I see some identification?" the policeman asked. The artist asked him why. The policeman said he'd received complaints from neighbors that a suspicious person seemed to be "casing" their houses. The artist explained what he was doing and showed the policeman his sketchbook.

The policeman stared at the sketches — still skeptical that someone would actually be doing such a thing — but finally left the artist to his work.

The artist, somewhat nonplussed by the experience, abandoned this location and wandered through the park for awhile. Eventually, he came to a section of the park where there were ball fields. School was out by this time, and the high school football team was practicing. The artist watched for a while, then, inspired by the movement of the players, took out his sketchbook again and began doing quick figure studies.

A few minutes later, he was approached by one of the football players. Again he was asked for identification.

"What for?" asked the flabbergasted artist.

"The coach," said the embarrassed boy. "He doesn't want anyone copying down our plays."

The artist went back to New York City.

## REVIEW

I was reminded of this story when I went to see Alex Piccirillo's show at the Wyckoff Gallery. Piccirillo lives in Nutley, which happens to be the same town as that in the anecdote. He is an accomplished pastel artist who works as a postman to support his family. Although he handles a variety of subjects — landscapes, models sitting in chairs, even boxers fighting in the ring — the subject that keeps pressing to the surface in all of these works is the artist's life.

Unless things have changed in Nutley, which is no different, really, from most other suburban towns in North Jersey, being an artist is not recognized as a serious activity for a grown person, unless, of course, you make lots of money at it. Chances are that Piccirillo is known as "Alex the Postman" to most of his neighbors.

There's no avoiding these issues in Piccirillo's work, because his art is so often a dialogue with his town, his friends, his circumstances, his fantasies, and his frustrations.

The major work of the show is a self-portrait in the studio, "The Effigy." In it, Piccirillo is seen as a bearded bear of a man who, with sleeveless shirt and tattoo, beer bottle and cigarette pack at hand, looks less like a bohemian than a biker.

The picture might seem like a bit of macho posturing, a portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-working-class-hero kind of thing, except that Piccirillo redeems his painting on an intellectual level with a wealth of allegorical objects like those found in Renaissance portraits. Crucified on the easel, for example, is "the effigy," the artist's postman shirt, representing his workday obligations. In the background is a poster of people drinking wine, an allusion perhaps, to the affluent good life that lies just beyond his reach. In his hand are rose-colored glasses,

which suggests that the artist is making a frank assessment of himself.

The whole thing fits together rather nicely and is interesting on another level, because it's a monumental-size pastel. Piccirillo has worked out a technique for doing big pastels on sheets of plywood, which entails preparing the surface with a mixture of gesso and ground pumice stone to give it some tooth. The surface is darkened, so that the process of giving form involves pulling light tones out of the darkness, which tends to give his work, even when based on observation, the quality of something imagined.

Piccirillo is at his best when there's an allegorical element to his work. Otherwise, he tends to fall back on his pastel technique and academic compositions. "Farewell Delores Jean" is a picture about his wife receiving the news of a friend's death. In the dark, eerily lit room, the woman sits curled up in an armchair near the phone. A mysterious bird — an omen of death — flies through the room, while in the foreground the same woman stands at the edge of a mirror wearing a bird mask. The message is unclear, but the painting communicates about death and transformation in a strong, dreamlike way.

Piccirillo seems most like a provincial artist in his boxing paintings. Perhaps that's because some seem like straight genre painting — sporting scenes of men slugging it out in the ring — in which there's drama but no magic.

The pastels of Nutley parks are reminders of why that New York artist wanted to recapture his childhood memories there. Nutley parks are themselves masterpieces of landscape design, parks in the Olmstead tradition of winding walks, ponds, and poetic vignettes. Piccirillo has a fondness for those arching footbridges that cross the myriad streams, and he uses them as effective stopping points in the trip back into space that the eye always takes in these works.

That whole ambivalent, romantic feeling about being an artist in a workaday suburb comes back in a painting of some figures standing outside a local tavern. If the foreground of this painting were isolated, the picture might be an Ashcan School depiction of some Bowery down-and-outs, including the artist himself by the tavern door in a long black coat. But what throws us about this scene is the lush, leafy background and the lovely twilight sky — which reminds us what a pleasant, sheltered world this really is, a town to raise children in, where the local tavern, with its promise of darkness, "nips" and bumper pool, is really a rather tame, domesticated affair.

It is this ever-present combination of grittiness and sweetness, of



Alex Piccirillo's exhibit includes the self-portrait "The Effigy."

harshness and coziness, that gives this show its interesting, bitter-sweet quality.

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The exhibit can be seen through

June 1. The gallery is at 210 Everett Ave., Wyckoff, near the old train station. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday. For information, call 891-7436.



"Panic in the Corner" reflects the artist's interest in boxing.