

San Francisco Chronicle

Saturday, March 29, 2008

Arnold's work reminds us of painting's power

By Kenneth Baker



In recent work at Catharine Clark's, Sonoma painter Chester Arnold continues a rear-guard argument for painting as an irreplaceable art, no matter its slowness and distance from the image terrain that most of us traverse every day.

From this perspective, "Prospector" (2008) counts as the most touching work in the show. It describes a low, river-cut canyon banded with colorful mineral strata, reminiscent of the geological glories reported by Thomas Moran (1837-1926), more than a half century before color film could compete.

A rickety bridge of wooden slats spans the narrow river, leading from a littered foreground shore to a crevasse in the

farther canyon wall, into which the "prospector" has evidently disappeared. The painting reads as a confession of Arnold's own possibly futile immersion in work, in a compulsion to strike gold among the mineral pigments of his art, symbolized so directly by the ravine's exposed bones.

The faint note of desperation in "Prospector," muted by Arnold's rare technical assurance, recurs throughout his show. It surfaces almost defiantly in two paintings and an etching that depict clusters of stretched, signed canvases turned to face the studio wall, symbolic of their low prospects of finding an audience.

Landscape has always had almost the force of a fictional character in Arnold's art, whether in open vistas such as "Reports to the Contrary" (2007-08), with its reminiscence of Hokusai's "Sudden Gust of Wind," or in more myopic views such as "The Miracle of the Frogs" (2008) and "The Fate of the Written Word" (2007).

The devastation Arnold depicts refers both to private emotional states and to public - even global - social ones. As a generator of pictorial subjects, it also challenges and liberates his technical chops and feel for composition.

An eye informed by abstract painting can barely stay focused on "The Fate of the Written Word" as an image, so forceful is its design. The picture describes what might be the remnants of a life - or a culture - strewn along an ill-maintained road, whether by a natural or a social disaster we cannot tell.

Its title sounds the pervasive note of pessimism, but the painting itself, like the show as a whole, marks a passage in a creative life well-spent.

Chester Arnold: The Road to Paradise: paintings, drawings and prints.

Through April 19. Catharine Clark Gallery, 150 Minna St., San Francisco. (415) 399-1439, www.cclarkgallery.com.

E-mail Kenneth Baker at kennethbaker@sfnchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/03/29/DDDLVQ7SV.DTL>

This article appeared on page E - 10 of the *San Francisco Chronicle*

his mustache is dabbled gray and his signature towed cap covers a hairline at ebbing tide, but as he inches in on 56 years, Chester Arnold blazes with an artistic ingenuity that outshines his already top-drawer talent.

His masterful paintings, known for their dark, foreboding and almost frightening overtones, have consistently garnered critical acclaim and commercial success. Now, with his deft command of detail still evident, there's also a lightness of being and (if it possible!) a sense of whimsy in his latest work. In one piece, a hat flies in a gusty wind; in another, a cheery red flag rises upright from a mailbox—imagery vastly removed from the burning tires and massive balls of rubble so characteristic of his life's work.

Chester smiles softly at Frances, his wife of 27 years, as she explains, "It's his happy work."

Chester is headed back to campus this semester after cherishing a six-month sabbatical from his teachings at College of Marin, where he is chairman of the art department. "It was the first time in my life I haven't had to do anything but paint," he says. Clearly it agreed with him. The work that resulted from this freedom is now showing at the Catherine Clark Gallery in San Francisco, with larger ones priced at \$40,000. Another reason to be happy.

"Every day adds another layer of material to your life, a place to draw from," he says. While he's always enjoyed his multifaceted days, now when Chester takes his usual three-mile runs around his eastside neighborhood, his thoughts are lighter. "At some point I exhausted myself trying to make the world a better place by making a political statement in my work. Maybe it was the sabbatical or maybe I'm

spring 2008 SONOMA 39



Trailblazing

Chester Arnold forges ahead in art, freedom and fire

STORY CAROLE KELLEHER
PHOTOS ROBBIE PENGELLY

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He credits his daughters with giving his work vitality and purpose.



looking forward to the end of the Bush administration and the disturbance he has caused in the world."

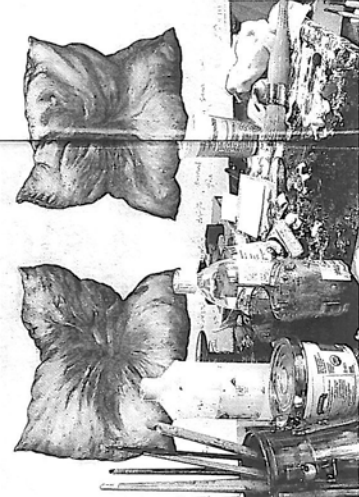
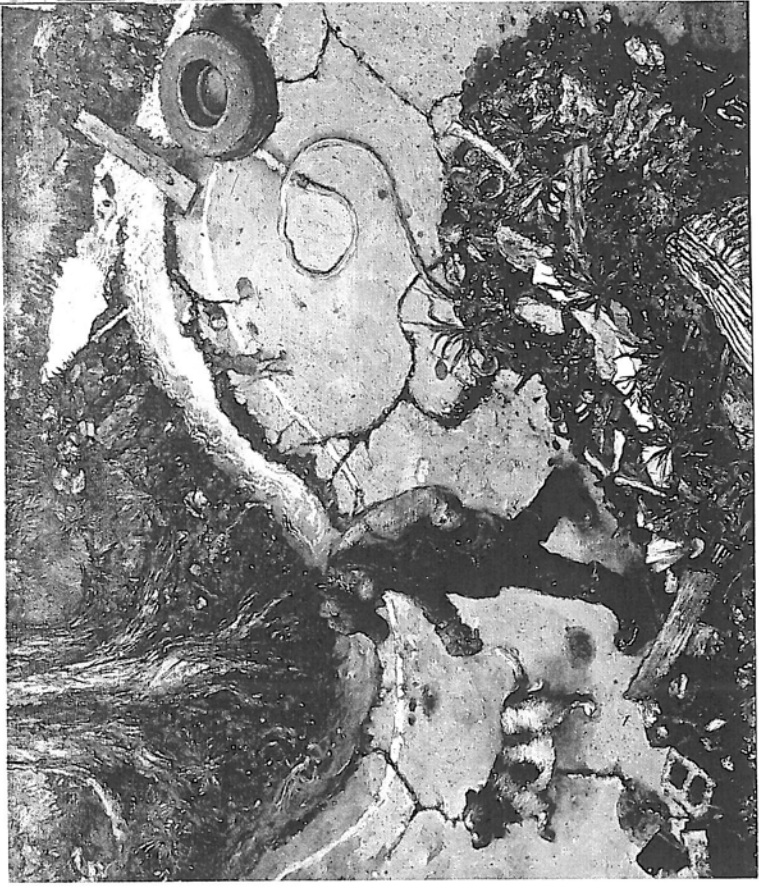
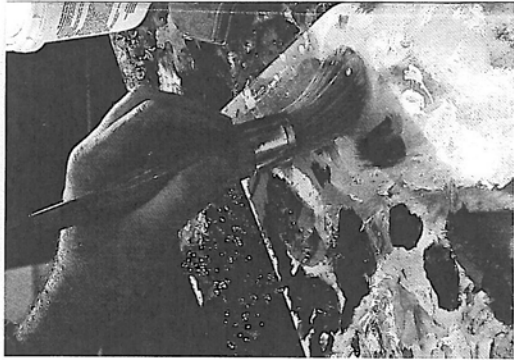
Chester has painted nearly every day of his entire life, starting as a teenager and reaching his stride after the arrival of his daughters, whom he credits with giving his work vitality and purpose. It was 1993 when the girls were very young that the family made the vast leap from Marin's suburban chic to the more rural, perhaps more inspirational, Valley of the Moon.

Now Lili, 18, and Dorothea, 20, are off expanding their own horizons in the college world. Chester misses them immensely, yet admits, "The house is ours again." He enjoys the intimacy of undivided attention he and Frances once again share, now that the weight of daily parenting has been lifted.

"He's an extraordinary painter, one of

the most imaginative, and through the years he's gotten much more developed and sophisticated. But to do what he does and have the pressure of supporting a family and being a good father, well, now we're on the other side of it," Frances says. She is his biggest fan, his most respected critic.

And Chester's made it. His paintings hang in the permanent collection of the di Rosa Preserve in Napa; the San Jose Museum of Art owns several pieces; his work is even immortalized in the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. Chester's had solo exhibitions in cities as diverse as Manhattan, Salt Lake City and Tacoma. He's a hometown star, shining as Sonoma Treasure Artist in 2003. Chester's on the map, yet his journey still continues swiftly upward.



Arnold curated "Faces of the Fallen," at SJMA (top). His paintings include "The Miracle of the Frogs" (above), "The Road to Paradise" (center), and "A Mudslide Dog" (right).



A garden scene with a huge, grizzly potato bug

"It's an amazing thing to have a museum buy your work," he says. "It's an honor. To an artist it's like receiving an Academy Award." And now he's ready for his next picture.

A representational painter, Chester fills sketchbook after sketchbook with ideas, miniature still lifes, using his favorites in sweeping, multiple-image creations. The same painting with the optimistic mailbox reveals a piano (he's played all his life), his father's boot from the Korean War (he keeps it in his studio), a handmade axe (he found it at a flea market and uses it to chop wood) and a frog ("I was channeling frogs for a while"). And, oh yes, a handgun, right there in the corner. "I'm using it as a design element," he says dismissively. Not all the darkness is gone.

When Chester was 36, his 26-year-old brother killed himself with a pistol. Later the coroner asked if Chester wanted the gun, a question he's not quite gotten over. "Why would I have wanted it? It had the power of death invested in it."

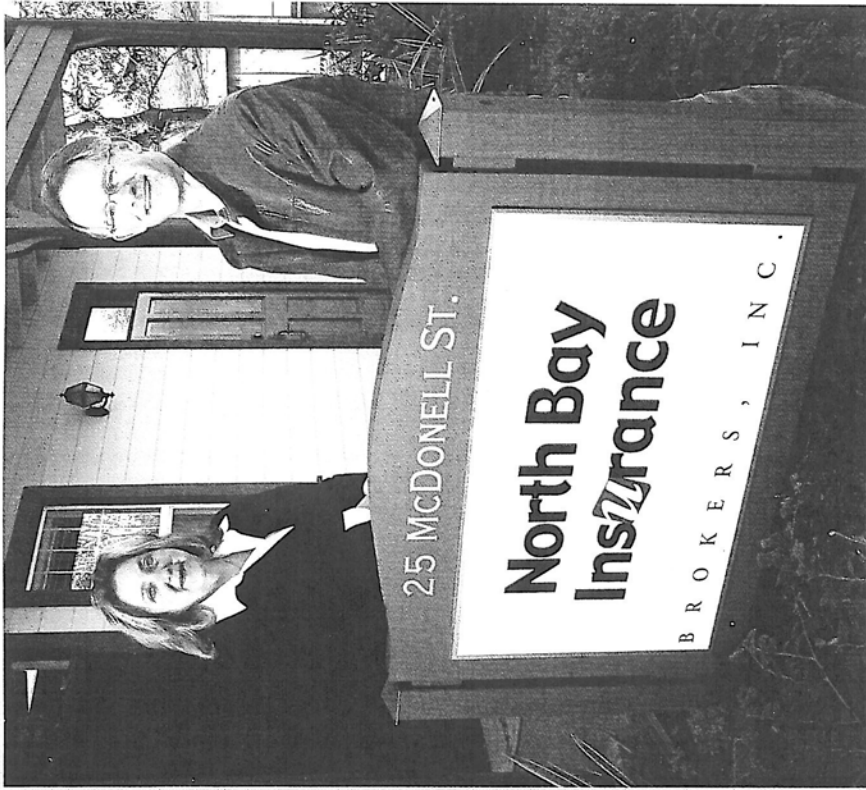
Years ago Chester painted a large canvas with what you might call a garden scene—green sod, mud, plants and right at the bottom center a huge, grizzly potato bug. "The gallery called and told him someone wanted to buy the painting but only if he would paint out the bug," Frances says. "He told them no, that it was the best part." The piece now graces their own high-ceilinged living room, hanging right above the couch—with great big yucky bug right at eye level.

He's a complicated man. Chester spent his formative years in Munich, Germany. His family moved there when he was five and stayed until it was time for his senior year of high school, when they returned stateside to Marin. His dad worked for the U.S. government

Chester with Frances. She's his biggest fan and most respected critic.

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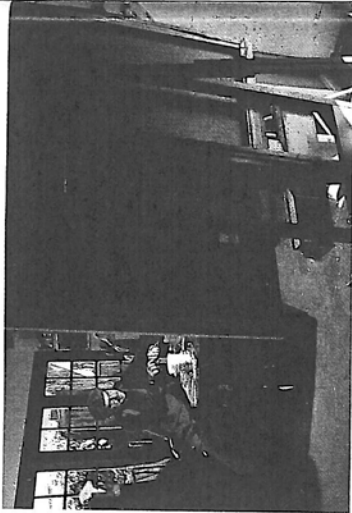
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More Arnold art: "Ghosts" (left), "The Singing Candelabra" (left, and now in the di Rosa Preserve collection), and "Ex Libris" (bottom).



as a language specialist and was, to put it bluntly, a spy.

Chester was a quiet, intellectual type who loved Gunter Grass' *The Tin Drum*, Camus and Kafka and listening to classical music. He attended American International Schools and thinks of himself even now as being very European in his outlook. As a teenager he saw an ad for the Famous Artists Correspondence School, which in those days was widely advertised in magazines and on matchbooks. His parents let him sign up—quite an expensive undertaking for them. When he immediately showed artistic aptitude, they enrolled him in private art lessons. Now Chester tells his daughters that art changed him from a pimply kid no one noticed to someone who had talent and, to his amazement, was admired.

"It was because I loved it and felt inspired to do it. I always had that burning desire. This is what I wanted to do from the very beginning."

continued on page 126

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Arnold's realism conveys his anxiety, and sense of humor

Some painters feel comfortable with plenty of distance between their work and their worldviews. Not Chester Arnold.

A sort of realist, the Sonoma painter persists in trying to phrase in images some of the anxiety and revulsion that his consciousness of living in history causes him. Fortunately he has a sense of humor, although the events of recent years have darkened it.

Arnold's new work at Catharine Clark pulls in several directions.

A series of tiny "Weed Studies" lines one short wall. It declares his admiration of Northern Renaissance painting and provides the only real respite from the onslaught of visions that follows.

Some pictures, such as the big "Crossroads" (2006), appear at first to lack topical reference. A horizonless landscape, "Crossroads" describes close up a woodland intersection of muddy ruts, its congested browns riven by small blue-white puddles that bring low tatters of bright, overcast sky.

Look closer, and disquieting, suggestive things emerge: a busted chain, a cell phone keypad, a rusting auto muffler, a human skull veiled by weeds and grass. The "Crossroads" turns from mere quagmire to a symbol of fateful quandary, even of life crisscrossed by death. How many "crossroads" and "turning points" have the masterminds of the Iraq debacle announced so far?

To Arnold's credit, the dawning of such associations does not drain the painting of all pleasure. Later in the show a Rabelaisian pair of little oil and graphite panels, one called "It's a Bunch of Crap," affirms an excrementitious reading of all that mud in "Crossroads."

Only a painter of well-earned confidence, near the end of his rope, would permit himself such elemental humor. The tradition of apocalyptic grotesquerie — think Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel — lifts such a piece above the merely puerile. That, plus the Freudian reading of creativity as a toying with excess and the modernist aesthetics of "uncomposed" paintings like those of Cy Twombly and Lucio Fontana. Has Arnold begun to show the strain of fabricating images to evoke his sense of life in extremis?

Not, certainly, in any slackening of his technique, which appears more relaxed and economical than ever. But we have to wonder what persuasive force he imagines a picture such as "Thy Will Be Done" (2006) will have. Will its intricate vision of intimate, coolly dispensed violence sting the conscience of anyone not already revolted by the known facts?

Maybe Arnold just has to get the nightmare out of his head, where at least it will stand still.

Or maybe we should take pictures such as "Thy Will Be Done" and "Scenes From the Lives of Latter-Day-Saints" (2006) as meditations on the relation between imagining or knowing of needless violence and suffering and moral implication in them. Narrative painting and the novel may be the forms best suited to such a reflection, though it exposes their limits.



Images courtesy Catharine Clark Gallery

"Crossroads" (2006), oil on canvas by Chester Arnold at Catharine Clark.

Chester Arnold:

Backwaters:

Paintings and drawings. Amy

Hicks: Suspended Series:

Projected video.

Through July 29.

Catharine Clark

Gallery, 49 Geary

St., San Francis-

co. (415) 399-

1439, www.cclarkgallery.com.

Debra Greene:

Conceptual paint-

ings. Through

Aug. 20. Limn

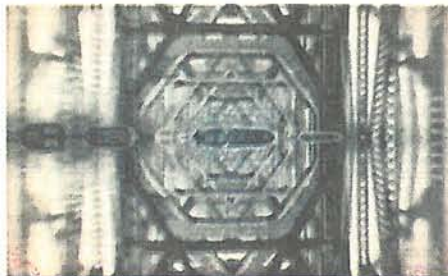
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Amy Hicks'

"Suspended 2

(San

Francisco-

Oakland)

(2005),"

16mm to

digital video.

Godard's "Alphaville." But without narrative or voice-over, merely a tissue of electronic sound, Hicks gets the viewer to see a passage through the universe in the most mundane of travels.

Greene has a system at Limn: In the long view, the work of San Franciscan Debra Greene resembles that of Spanish-born New York painter Teo Gonzalez.

Like him, Greene covers rectangular surfaces with tiny dollops of paint. But whereas Gonzalez relies on a carefully ruled grid to keep a regular beat going behind his inconstant droplets of color, Greene will use seemingly gridded passages to deceive us into thinking we know what we see.

A very close look at the surfaces on which Greene works reveals tiny numerals alongside each dollop of paint.

In a piece such as "Data Inventory: 2837 Backward Red," the eye discovers a pleasing flicker of detail. But the knowledge that Greene has organized the details according to a system we cannot discern damps that pleasure down.

Call it "paranoid abstraction" if you like; Greene has found non-referential means to focus our intensifying sense that the most ordinary things we see have systems, uses and meanings connecting them that probably not even Washington leakers could unmask.

Other, less epic, efforts show Arnold working in a homier vein. "A Wet Year With Pigs" (2006) describes a rural homestead a-jumble with critters, disused tools, furniture and vehicle parts. I suspect it of being a metaphoric self-portrait that conflates Arnold's views of his inner life and of his studio.

Visitors to Clark should not overlook Amy Hicks' video work.

Hicks shot 16mm footage of some very familiar transits — trips across Bay Area bridges — and rendered them visually absorbing, though unrecognizable in many passages. She converted the film to digital video and at some point intervened to split the footage horizontally, making unsteady mirror images of its top and bottom halves.

After Hicks' treatment, landmarks such as light poles, elevated signs and bridge struts take on a kaleidoscopic abstraction. The rooftops of cars glide through space like a flock of UFOs.

Hicks' "Suspended Series" may recall moments from cinematic oddities such as Chris Marker's "La Jetée" or Jean-Luc

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San Francisco Chronicle

SATURDAY, MAY 22, 2004

Art as a spectator to our times Arnold's paintings draw viewer's mind to contemporary events

In new work at Catharine Clark, Bay Area painter Chester Arnold persists in trying to redress his art form's apparent loss of force as a medium of witness to its time.

Now that digital technology has dispelled the credibility the camera once enjoyed, painting as a tracer of passing history perhaps has some ground to regain from photography.

Arnold moves on two fronts. In pictures such as "Triumph" and "Special Concerns of Men," he deploys a stylized realism to make more or less topical allegory. In others, such as "Gravity Rules, Though Men Die Trying" and "The Rapture," he invents images that permit a display of his medium.

In "The Rapture," numberless tiny human figures fill a large canvas edge to edge. Ominously, they each raise an arm in the same direction. Painting the figures at

this scale required reducing them to a few flicks of the brush, producing an inflected field that, from across the room, goes all but abstract. A field painting about forebodings of mob psychology. Arnold apparently titled his show "Reconstruction" for its echo of current war talk, though the title redoubles too blatantly the irony of a picture such as "Triumph" (2003-04).

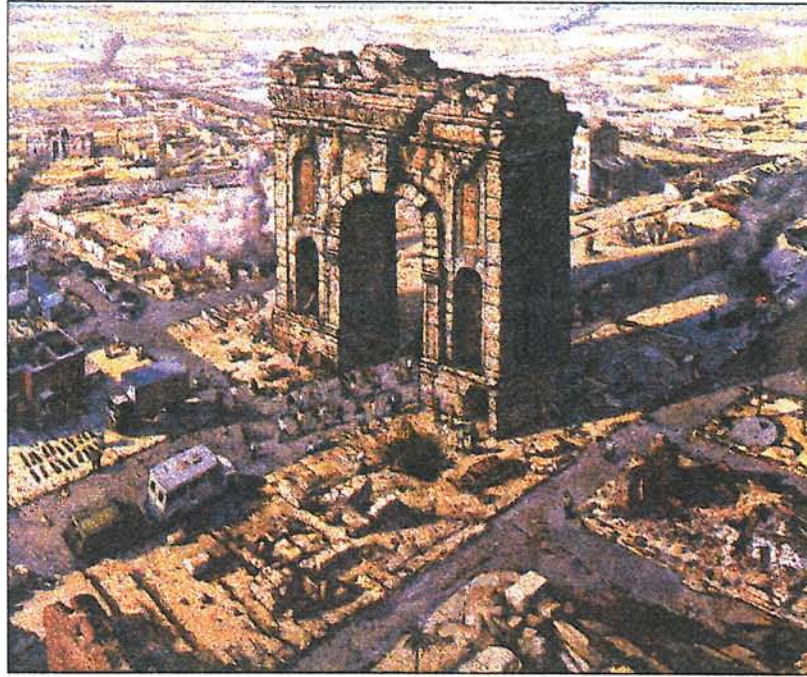
Here a battle-hammered European-style triumphal arch towers over an anarchic urban desert landscape. The picture's high viewpoint takes in a scattering of faceless men, vehicles, small buildings and nameless rubble, raked by hot sunlight. Plumes of smoke rise nearby and far off. A Baghdad of the mind.

Making such paintings may be Arnold's way of redeeming time — the very time in which fellow men do terrible things to one another — and of burning off some of the helplessness we all feel at the ungovernability of life.

Visitors who know modern art will spot some of Arnold's bleak jokes. In "A Natural History of Destruction" (2003-04), a gargantuan human brain hangs over a scorched cityscape like a mushroom cloud or one of Rene Magritte's levitating boulders.

The painting borrows its title from W.G. Sebald's little book about the Allied firebombing of German cities. Sebald borrowed the title from the British mastermind of the bombing campaign, who could never write his planned report on the air assault's effects after he had witnessed them.

Arnold's work bears witness not so much to the dire events of the day as to the trials of imagination to which the news of those events subjects him and us.



Chester Arnold's "Triumph" (2003-04) is one of his pieces in "Reconstruction" at Catharine Clark.

Kenneth Baker
Galleries

Chester Arnold: Reconstruction: Paintings. **Michael Damm: Atoms:** Video. Through June 26. Catharine Clark Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 399-1439, www.cclarkgallery.com.

Pop Remix: Video and video games reprogrammed by seven artists. Through June 12. SF Camerawork, 1246 Folsom St., San Francisco. (415) 863-1001, www.sfcamerawork.org.

Damm's "atoms": In Clark's video project room, Michael Damm presents a two-channel video projection in which sound slowly eclipses image as one watches.

Shooting with a fixed camera from various vantage points, Damm studied the recent demolition of the old Emporium department store. The title "atoms" refers to the isolation Damm recorded, in which most of the workers on the job work isolation by noise, by the nature of the project. Long spells of blank screen alternate with passages of cheerless documentary.

Only sound — recorded on site and electronically modified — evokes the elaborate connective tissue of skills, cooperation and planning that invisibly gives coherence to the glimpses of behavior we see. But only someone who has already thought about labor, and gives Damm's piece the time it demands, will take his meaning.

"Pop Remix" at Camerawork: Marisa Olson has put together a highly entertaining show for SF Camerawork called "Pop Remix."

It looks for the impulses behind



Anthony Discenza displays compressed video footage of network news anchors in "Hosts" (2004), at SF Camerawork.

Pop art — the raiding of mass-audience images for stuff of formal or diagnostic interest — as they re-surface among a generation raised on electronics rather than movies and comics.

Paul Pfeiffer makes a direct, though conceptual, connection with Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg's gesture of erasing a de Kooning drawing as well as Warhol's fixation on Marilyn.

Anthony Discenza continues his raid on commercial television in "Hosts" (2004), three ceiling-mounted monitors that play compressed video footage of network news anchors. The resulting makeovers reveal a monstrosity

hidden in the conventions of TV "talent."

But Jennifer and Kevin McCoy have the last word on conventions as content in two pieces that ask what someone would know about the world who learned it by watching '70s television.

For "Every Episode, Every Shot," they catalogued the contents of the entire "Starsky and Hutch" series, categorizing the results in a huge playable library of disks.

The disks' contents include "Every Thug," "Every Sitting in a Car," "Every Affirmative Response," "Every Eating of Food" and "Every Sneaking Around With Guns." That's remixed entertainment.

E-mail Kenneth Baker at kennethbaker@sfrchronicle.com.



THURSDAY ♦ MAY 4, 2000

FIRST THURSDAY

Beyond the landscape

A show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery uses various media to redefine how we look at contemporary landscapes



A tongue-in-cheek meditation on nature and man: "Two Corbies (Two Crows)," by Chester Arnold, is one of the works in the new show that explores the idea of landscape at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

By D.K. ROW
THE OREGONIAN

Given Oregon's extraordinary natural beauty — from its lush, green parks to the scope and grandeur of Mount Hood — it's all but expected for artists to think about the bounty surrounding us.

But in a new show opening tonight at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, "Disintegration: Contemporary Landscape," a group of local and national artists contemplate the natural landscape of our region (and beyond) in ways that transcend the notion of a conventionally pretty painting or documentary photograph.

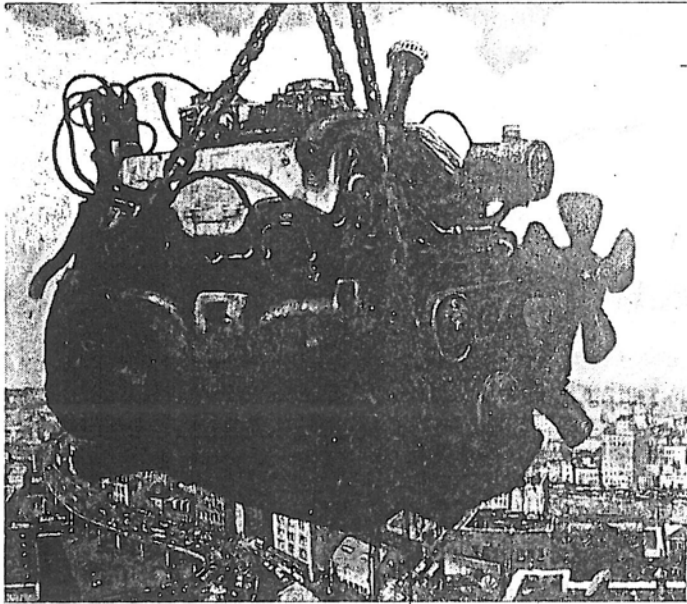
The show features nine artists — Chester Arnold, Jeffrey Beauchamp, Lawrence Gipe, Tim Hailand, Robert ParkeHarrison, Christopher Rauschenberg, Vanessa Renwick, Rita Robillard and Larry Schwarm — and has more than 30 works in a variety of media from painting to video art. Curated by Leach, the show pushes the familiar boundaries of the traditional landscape.

Arnold's masterful large-scale paintings, for example, offer a piercing, tongue-in-cheek commentary on humanity's place in the natural world. Rauschenberg's multi-paneled, black-and-white photographs capture both the natural beauty and inherent tensions of exotic locales.

Robillard, chairwoman of Portland State University's Art Department, contributes a series of mixed-media paintings and scrolls that reference traditional Japanese scrolls and aesthetics. Filmmaker Renwick, an up-and-comer on the local scene, has contributed a video piece on the recent four-alarm fire in the Pearl District.

The scope and variety of the exhibit should offer viewers a fresh perspective that not only questions what "landscape" might mean in the 21st century, but also, where it — and we — may be going.

You can reach D.K. Row by phone at 503-412-7035 or by e-mail at dkrow@news.oregonian.com.



Chester Arnold's painting *Engine Work* shows industry as it eclipses the urban.

VISUAL ARTS

BY DANIEL DUFORD

243-7122 EXT. 813

Highway Sublime

As the American landscape changes, so does landscape painting. A show at Elizabeth Leach takes in the view at the end of the century.

REVIEW

View from Here: New American Landscape works by regional and national painters
Elizabeth Leach Gallery
207 SW Pine St.,
224-0521
Ends Aug. 28

Also showing in this exhibition are James Barsness, Nicole Eisenman and Mark Innerst.

There is nothing so urban as a landscape painting. When 19th-century artist Asher Brown Durand painted *Kindred Spirits*, a depiction of two men overlooking a vast wilderness in the Hudson Valley, he created a fabrication for his real audience—urban intellectuals in the parlors of Philadelphia and New York. The spiritual salve and purity of the landscape are often fictions of the urbanite. Follow the thread from Durand to photographer Ansel Adams, whose grand vistas often grace Sierra Club calendars, and what emerges is landscape

voyeurism. From Thoreau to Kerouac, "out there" means purity, salvation, timelessness; "here in the city" means human corruption and decay. The great American landscape is out there, they tell us, but it's just about gone.

View from Here: New American Landscape, the current group show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, interprets this tradition. Here the elegiac tone is found in the breaking down of cars or industrial landscapes. With a recurring thread emphasizing the place of urbanization and automobiles in our sense of landscape, these artists assert that "out there" is actually "right here."

In the landscape tradition, ruins of churches often stand as symbols of human mortality in the face of the sublime. Here, the car is a surrogate for those sentiments. Henk Pander's *Buried Buick* depicts a smashed-up old blue Buick in a boulder-strewn ravine. There is a sense of discard, in which the Buick, once desirable, becomes a useless artifact. Pander's realism invites an open narrative. An accident is suggested (one can almost hear ghostly strains of "Johnny Angel" playing in the ravine's still breeze), and time has dismantled the memory of the event. Rather than the ruins in a 19th-century romantic painting such as Friedrich's *Abbey in an Oak Forest*, in which gnarled oak trees flank the ruined façade of an abbey, Pander gives us a ruin of our own holy relic: the automobile.

In a similar reference, Jeremy Borsos' *Hot Rod God* buries the image of a pink muscle car in a light, misty color field overlaid with a church steeple. The image of the steeple is rendered in black-and-white, while the hot rod oscillates in and out of view. It is a mark of Borsos' ability as a painter that he can create the effect of two distinct images coexisting on the canvas. Unfortunately, the title closes off any poetic association the viewer might have between the two images and creates a dead-end one liner. Forget the title and meditate on the painting, which is quietly alluring.

Across from *Hot Rod God* is one of the more arresting images of the show. Chester Arnold's *Engine Work* depicts a dark, oily engine block hanging over a writhing, smoky cityscape. The engine block here is akin to the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Dark and visceral, straining the heavy chains, it is the automobile as hand of God. The ant-like human enterprise of the city is visible on an overpacked freeway against a crumbling urban skyline.

Linked symbiotically to the urban in the modern consciousness of place is the suburban. Peter Drake's works *The Tackle* and *Bluff* suggest a hazy memory of the suburban '60s. They are poetic allegories of the back yard. *The Tackle* is a stilled moment that seems to be receding from memory. The suggestion of a hedge behind two figures conjures a kind of mass nostalgia for a television childhood. A figure in a checkered plaid shirt could be any number of us who grew up in the wake of the suburbanization of the landscape. Drake's shimmering freeze-frame deftly suggests movement and stasis simultaneously. Poignancy infiltrates the elegy, as all the implications of suburbia's banality hover at the edges of Drake's work.

Perhaps the American moment we most sentimentalize at the end of the 20th century is the manufacturing zenith of the '40s through the '60s. In Jeremy Borsos' *Luddites*, three striped factory stacks stand against a stewing sky, the disused and maligned factories exuding melancholy. One stack is leaning; a spindly string leads from it to an invisible source out of the frame. The Luddites are pulling down industrialization, but they are too late; they are dismantling ghosts. What emerges from this show is a nostalgia for a time when America's economy was driven by physical production (cars, steel, machines) and for the seemingly easy answers of the nationalistic mid-century. Even artists who may be attempting irony here can't help allowing this haunted sense of time's passage to permeate the work.

View from Here is a thoughtfully assembled group show. A few weak choices aside, a thread gently tethers the works together. If the sublime American landscape still exists, these artists suggest, look for it on the highways—not too far outside the city limits. **xxx**

visual arts

THE OREGONIAN, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1995

Landscapes to provoke thought

Chester Arnold's paintings always have some detail that disturbs

"Worlds Apart" presents exactly that: houses separated by a chasm, with a city settled far below.

By MEGAN McMORRAN
Special writer, The Oregonian

Study a Chester Arnold landscape painting, and something beyond his facility with paint and brush becomes apparent. Though beautiful and imposing, Hallmark Cards they are not.

"Winter Fires" is an encompassing white, cold, forest scene. Through a veil of large snowflakes dotting the canvas, stolid evergreens hold heavy shelves of snow and cold. They're pretty and reassuringly familiar. But Arnold isn't through: Out of the corner of your eye you notice a series of irksome fires enveloping the background trees.

The calm winter scene takes a dangerous — maybe even sinister — turn. To the viewer, safe in the gallery, it's vaguely funny and maybe a bit worrisome, but mostly it's morbidly fascinating. What's going on here? The contradiction is jolting and compelling.

Arnold, a 42-year-old Bay Area artist, plays this game over and over in his current show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery. It's a game of content: What twisty narratives can he

induce in the imaginations of his audience?

The meaning intended by a painting is important, sure, but what's imagined upon viewing it is equally so. These eerie scenes, prompted by little clutches of disaster on the periphery, can instantly trigger a cluster of imaginative sparks. It's faster than reading, yet its effect is literary — a range of stories, unanswered, mysterious.

review

"New Paintings"

WHERE: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 207 S.W. Pine St.

HOURS: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m., Mondays through Saturdays

CLOSING: Oct. 28

ADMISSION: Free

On the face of it, Arnold's paintings are impressive both because of their scale — always large in size and/or meaning — and their celebration of landscape. Though they are among the work of five artists in an exhibition called "New Paintings," Arnold's urgent and majestic scenes dominate. He is a skillful painter, we realize right away, whose meticulous use of color, light and texture is immediately engaging.

Arnold is not the only figurative landscape painter whose work is both physically opulent and richly imaginative. But he is one of the most dynamic, striking a magic balance between the two concerns.

Arnold's "stories" go in all directions. References to the strange enchantment of natural and manmade disasters — lightning, floods, earthquakes, car crashes, violence — only suggest the tumult of human reaction they cause.

In "Worlds Apart," for instance, a high plateau is split in two (one assumes by earthquake), exposing a city view at the bottom. On either side of the gigantic fissure sit a few modest, prosaic houses. But the road that joined them abruptly spills over the edges on both sides. Telephone lines are broken; their wires hang loosely over the road. Severed sewer pipes gush liquid into the gulf, the bottom of which is a pinched view of that sprawling cityscape. Loose rocks spatter off the cliff wall. What look to be human bones are embedded in the opposing canyon wall — another sinister story revealed by this new catastrophe.

Everything might spill into that gulf, onto that city far below, further insult to the quiet green, manicured lawns and the tidy houses. A new house is going up, its foundation on the horizon of this once pastoral, country setting. A tenuous quiet barely contains the scene. Anxiety reigns.

But it doesn't stifle. In all of Arnold's work, when we're not intoxicated by the curious meanings, we are drawn in by gorgeous and expansive rocks and landscapes, battered skies, the intense and wrenching detail of the land. He pulls us in and out spatially, with a myopic foreground and a long-distance background.

The choice of grand and texturally detailed landscape painting is calculated. Arnold throws himself these vistas, endowing them with both a visual and a spiritual appeal that recalls landscape painters before him. They serve as wonderful platforms for the narratives he suggests. Like writers who know to "show, not tell," Arnold keeps a cool detachment from his paintings.

Arnold: Artist speaks to collective loneliness

Continued from Page 6

There is no sentimentality, no obvious emotion. Just the quirky, unassailable facts.

Good art provokes discussion, not the least of which is that of the viewer with the painting. Arnold is guided by that connection. He succeeds in finding that evasive and ephemeral visual language that speaks to a collective loneliness, a symptom that has bred a multimillion-dollar therapy industry and an insecure, silently trembling society.

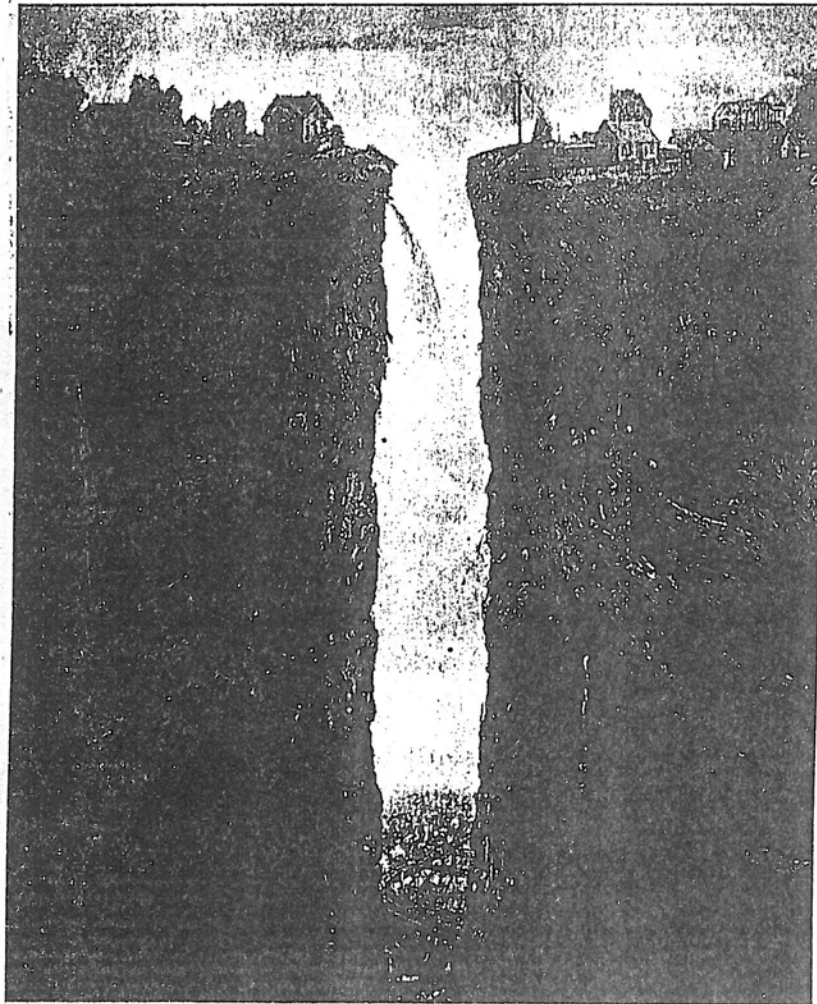
Grand landscape and natural disasters, however beautiful and awesome, can instantly reestablish our small part in the scheme of things. But humility is easily lost on a culture that was built by the American cult of individuality. With a ready vocabulary and some powerful images, Arnold locates and elaborates both tendencies: the loneliness and its flip side, individuality.

Best of all, he does it with wit and imagination, offering us the same strategies along the way.

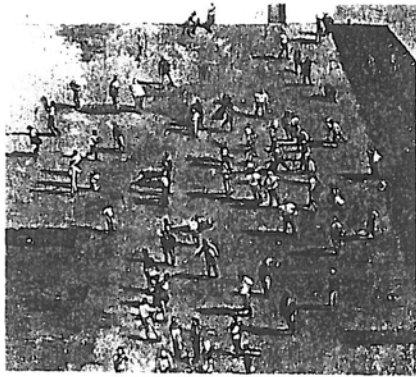
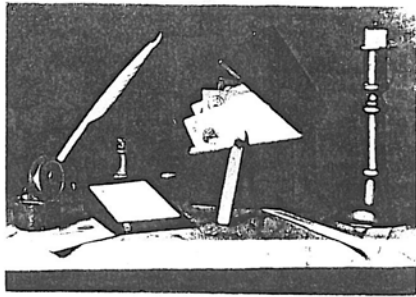
In addition to Arnold's work, New York artist Peter Drake has a series of startling, dreamlike images: In "Nest," a nude woman is climbing a large plant of some sort, atop which sits a podlike shape. "Blading" shows a dark figure in skates below a church archway. A nude boy sits astride a large, old-fashioned bike with a hood tied over his head in "Gothic."

Drake's lithographs and his oil paintings have an attractive muted quality. Adding layers of oil paint over gesso/plaster, he sands away layers to create a mystical sense of light and a smooth surface. He has been accused of being too slick, but that effect only adds to the haunting surrealism.

Chicago's David Kroll offers witty and delicate still lifes; Brad Durham and Jeremy Borsos are also included.



Please turn to
ARNOLD, Page 7



San Francisco



from Maria Forges

WILLIAM M. HARNETT AT THE DE YOUNG MEMORIAL MUSEUM, 14 November–14 January
 CHESTER ARNOLD AT SUSAN CUMMINS, 27–28 November

Over the past several years, a procession of exhibitions, articles, and books have attempted to persuade us of the importance of artists previously left in the margins of art history. These fishing expeditions have brought us face to face with the works of so many, from the ridiculous to the sublime, that it's hard to believe there's anyone left to rediscover and rehabilitate. William M. Harnett (1848-92), trompe l'oeil still-life painter extraordinaire, was celebrated by the popular press during his short career for making work so convincing that many viewers were reportedly fooled to the point of having to touch the canvas, certain that what they saw was real. For decades after his death, however, his paintings were virtually forgotten, and no serious study of his work as a whole has ever been undertaken. At least, until now. A major traveling retrospective of Harnett's handsome images of inanimate objects, including books, sheet music, pipes, newspapers, violins, money, guns, and dead rabbits, has come to San Francisco. The hefty catalogue that accompanies the show (you've seen the pictures, now read the book!) contains more than twenty essays. These discuss everything from Harnett's health problems—rheumatoid arthritis, followed by kidney disease and death at the age of 44—to his place in social history, his relationship to the work of other still life artists, and an exhaustive, blow-by-blow examination of the different kinds of things he liked to paint. There is a lot of guarded speculation about the meaning of his compositions, but since the artist himself said little more than that there was a meaning, all anyone can really do is guess.

One thing we do know for a fact is that in Harnett's time, his work was marginalized by the academy as vulgar, monkey-like, exploitative trickery. What seems to have bothered nineteenth-century arbiters of taste the most was that these paintings broke the rules about the relationship between

viewer and image. Like a sideshow con man, Harnett tempted and teased his audience, drawing them into his invented reality until they couldn't help but try to physically enter the space of the work. With a brazen contempt for the higher purpose of art (it was said), he made people much more interested in *what* they were seeing, and *how*, than in any narrative. And they loved it. In the post-Civil War era (as one writer in the catalogue notes), people were "eager for spectatorship and sensationalism, obsessed with imitation and illusion . . ." In short, they were hungry for—you guessed it—*simulacra*. And Harnett, who was portrayed as willing to risk "the loneliness, alienation, and poverty that were the social, artistic, and economic costs of the undertaking of illusionistic still-life painting" in order to give them those false images, has become a Profile in Courage.

Putting all this fascinating spin-doctoring aside, it's clear that Harnett was a very skilled, hard-working artist who made the kind of paintings he wanted to. A lot of people liked his work because he had an eye for objects attractively rich with a patina of use and age, as well as a gift for making people want to believe in what they were seeing. Rust and newsprint gleam like mellow jewels in his highly magnetic images. Polite lines of tape on the floor do no good: the guards constantly have to ask visitors to back off.

One of the ironies of Harnett's demarginalization is that the prevailing style of his time—narrative, figurative (but non-illusionistic) paintings—is presently marooned somewhere out at the edges of contemporary practice. Time passes; the wheel turns. As Harnett's case demonstrates, though, some artists are just not interested in being *au courant*. Chester Arnold's narrative, figurative (but non-illusionistic) canvases demonstrate this kind of singular pursuit of a personal vision. In Arnold's world, a cold light falls on wintry, sullen landscapes seen from far above. In painting after painting, scenes which initially suggest something relatively benign—a Sunday afternoon in the park, a group of men in a sunny courtyard, twilight views of fallow fields—begin, on closer examination, to emanate a dark, apocalyptic weirdness. In the crowded park of *Incidents at Half Past Five* (all works, 1992), a man lies on the ground, apparently felled by something dropped on him by a boy in the tree above; nearby, a soldier points a threatening finger at a terrified grandmother. In a clearing a few steps away, a group of men seem to be killing each other. This kind of casual carnage is repeated in *Maximum Security Exercise*, which shows a prison yard, possibly from the vantage point of a guard tower. While some of the inmates play basketball, others lie bleeding on the concrete.

For Arnold, nature is as inexplicably violent as culture. In *Fin-de-Siecle*, a tree split by lightning dominates the foreground. A small fire smolders, its smoke leading like a pointer to the ruins of a house nearby. Far in the distance, steel wool clouds gather over a city along the horizon; either another storm is about to break, or the city, too, is in flames.

Unlike Harnett's seductively nostalgic gems, these paintings are not meant to be approached intimately, even the ones that vastly enlarge small things (most notably, a group of houseflies the size of guinea pigs, savagely titled *A New Generation*). Seen up close, their surfaces are a choppy, brusque impasto of knifed and brushed marks that break apart, yielding little or no detail. Perhaps this is because Arnold's paintings

William M. Harnett
Secretary's Table, 1879
 Oil on canvas
 14" x 20"

Chester Arnold
Maximum Security Exercise, 1992
 Oil on canvas
 48" x 54"



HUNTERS IN THE SNOW, 1990, oil on canvas, 72" x 87"



CHARLES KENNARD

CHESTER ARNOLD

"It's beginning to feel like this painting will be the core of my next show," says artist Chester Arnold of an unfinished canvas propped against a wall in his Marin studio. "I can tell by the energy I have when I work on it."

Arnold has been painting since his childhood in Germany, where he learned to paint by studying and copying art. "By studying paintings I learned the amount of detail it takes to make magic happen," he says.

But it was a Max Beckman retrospective he saw at the age of 16 that influenced Arnold to dedicate his life to painting. "It was then that I realized I wanted to be a painter," he says. "His work made me feel that there was no other course for me to take." The morning after he saw Beckman's show,

Arnold gathered together everything he had and sold it, buying art supplies with the profits.

With detailed brushstrokes and a broad palette, Arnold's paintings examine everything from the artist's transient nature to the drama that unfolds during a



SUMMER FIRES, 1990, oil on canvas, 74" x 82"

walk among the trees. Among his current works is a painting that captures the wandering spirit of the artist. He portrays his subject trudging along, a faint smile on his face, the trappings of his life and work on his back and an endless expanse of land in the background. "I've always painted in an attempt to interact with the world," Arnold comments. "I wanted to show the things I feel passionately about. At the moment I feel I've found my own context and my own voice and I'm struggling for the time to express that."

Fascination with a subject and persistent images prompt Arnold to build stories into his paintings. "In order to satisfy me, a painting has to have the possibility of a message."

Despite his love for art and the importance of self-expression, Arnold admits he sometimes goes for long periods of time without feeling inspired. When the muse does strike, however, it often comes from his need to share with others. He has been teaching since 1987 at campuses in the Bay Area and is currently assistant professor at San Francisco State University. "I enjoy showing students how to look at things the way I've been looking at them for years," he says. "It's really a luxury to be able to share what I feel."

Arnold is hard at work on his next group of paintings. His work is permanently displayed at the Susan Cummins Gallery in Mill Valley.

— Susan Sprinkle

ART

DATEBOO!

Painting on the Sly in Marin

GALLERIES
Kenneth Baker

Modernism is supposed to have run its course by now, but the anxious self-consciousness that was its mark is still intensifying.

One reason is the constant tacit message of mass media that everything that happens is being recorded (though may be edited out later). An artist who wants to be taken seriously must signal awareness of this secular sense of universal, indifferent witness, which everyone feels. In too much contemporary art, irony serves this purpose. So to paint representationally without irony seems more difficult than ever.

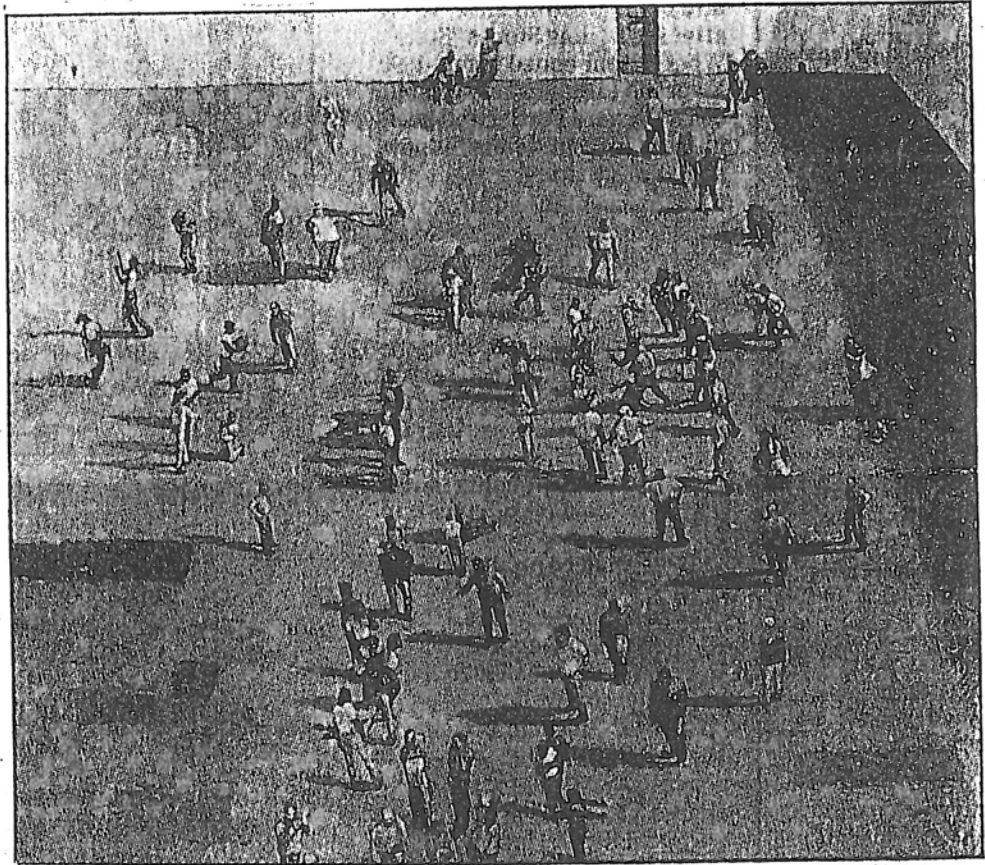
With these conditions in mind, you cannot but be impressed by the recent paintings of Chester Arnold at the Susan Cummins Gallery, 12 Miller Avenue, Mill Valley (through next Saturday).

Arnold is an old-fashioned painter in that he insists on making by hand pictures that are technically, narratively and psychologically complex. But as an inventor of images, he is also devilishly aware of what he does.

Consider a picture titled "Maximum Security Exercise" (1992).

Here we look down upon a prison yard where several dozen inmates mill about. The prisoners, who cast long shadows, are distant enough that at first they look merely like a device for scattering bits of color within a grayish field. The dispersed figures recall the faceless crowds that lend scale and movement to the open plazas in paintings by Canaletto (1697-1768) and serve him as symbols of the arts and society reconciled.

A closer look at Arnold's canvas reveals that the "exercises" going on in the yard include various acts of intimidation and violence. Yet the echo of Canaletto is enough to let us recognize "Maximum Security Exercise" as a kind of Sartrean vision of society — male society anyway — as a closed system in which each is at the mercy of all, if only in being defined individually by a welter of relationships.



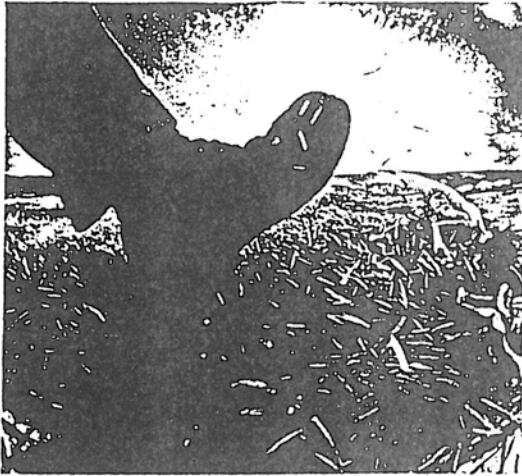
'Maximum Security Exercise,' a 1992 oil by Chester Arnold, is among his recent paintings on display at the Susan Cummins Gallery in Mill Valley

At another level, "Maximum Security Exercise" may criticize the work of Bay Area painter Christopher Brown. Brown too peppers his paintings with abstracted figures, seen as though from afar (or through an ill-focused telephoto lens), but he does not commit himself to any discernible narrative. It is as though Arnold were reproaching him here for a failure of nerve.

Another layering of old and new references appears in Arnold's "A New Generation (Flies)" (1992). Here, upon a pasty white field, sits a scattering of house flies as big as house cats. The same bitter vision of society is rendered here in extreme close-up, which turns the flies into guys, without humanizing them.

Arnold's flies are painted with a fascinating accuracy reminiscent of Renaissance naturalist imagery. But he scatters them in a way that seems true to insect spontaneity (as we perceive it) and that mimics the studiously uncomposed look in contemporary painting made fashionable by Terry Winters. Again, I suspect a veiled reproach to a fellow painter for merely pretending full commitment to the power of the medium in hand.

Arnold's paintings are remarkably different from one another except in how well they are made. His ongoing effort to touch, in the hope someday to command, every level on which painting operates grows more impressive with each show he has.



Chester Arnold, *The End of an Era*, 1989, oil on linen, 74 x 84".

SAN FRANCISCO

CHESTER ARNOLD

WILLIAM SAWYER
GALLERY

The legacy of the vogue for "bad" painting has been a lot of bad paintings. But when and if the art world rewards skillful image-making again, Bay Area painter Chester Arnold will be in a strong position. Arnold has evolved his own brand of dreamy, intermittently nightmarish realism. It is governed by a rich, flickering touch that is equally conversant with the American reverie of Charles Burchfield, the landscape space of early Dutch painting, and the cryptic, in-your-face narrative of the late Philip Guston. Several of the big pictures in Arnold's latest show have worm's-eye vantage points, partly to allow the artist the pleasure of painting, almost blade by blade, swaths of parched grass. Arnold tunes his work's verisimilitude to allow for a generous, but not too sumptuous display of paint.

For all its probity of technique, Arnold's art is not without irony or self-preoccupation. This show was dominated by a picture called *Supply and Demand* (all works, 1989), an uningratiating but beautifully realized image of a huge fist pounding on a wood slab, causing some loose change to bounce into the air. The painting expresses bluntly the frustration felt by most painters who try to support themselves by their art. The mighty fist brings Guston to mind both by its directness and by the way it galvanizes pictorial space. If Arnold hadn't produced such a strong show, this angry gesture would have seemed merely self-indulgent. (As it was, the scale and violence of the image threw the

show out of balance.) But the artist earns brandishing rights by turning out a big roomful of pictures without redundancy and with hardly a square inch where craftsmanly attention flags.

The pragmatic and inner struggles of the painter's life, and the speculators' ruin of the California landscape—both shadowed by presentiments of death—have been points of departure for Arnold in years past. *Fallen Logger*, for example, is a close-up view of the stump and trunk-end of a just-felled tree. Next to them lie the feet of the supine logger, victim perhaps of some unexplained ecological retribution. Ominously, only the axe, its blade bit into the tree stump, still stands. Several works in this show had their source in the artist's responses to the recent death of his father. The paintings' elegiac references are transfigured so as not to reveal their impetus openly. *The End of an Era* is almost comic: from a ground-level vantage point, a foot boots a skeleton out of the frame. Jawbones tumble away at the lower right while the cranium sails out of the upper corner against a light-soaked sky, like a wayward planet. (In fact, the skeleton is a studio prop that has cropped up in Arnold's work for years.) The artist kicks it away in a symbolic effort to rid himself of unassuageable grief. The pit that yawns beneath Arnold's foot in the foreground suggests that the grave is never far from his mind, but that it won't halt his stride in the meantime.

In the big foot that sweeps into *The End of An Era*, there is a remembrance of the keep-on-truckin' stride of R. Crumb's "Mr. Natural." But most of the artistic references and the humor in Arnold's images are more submerged than this. The daring exception in this show was *One Last Landscape (With Sunflower)*, an homage to Van Gogh. It is

a tall, narrow canvas filled by a towering sunflower at the edge of a parched field, with a plein-air painter collapsed at the foot of his easel in the distance. Arnold avoids expressionistic technique here, but extends with wry modesty the Northern Romantic vision that culminated in Van Gogh and early Mondrian. I know few painters who could make such a painting and avoid souring it with irony or trickery.

—Kenneth Baker