

REPAINTING

Is there a new role for the artist?

BY REBECCA SCHOENKOPF

I'M NOT ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE who yammer in nasal tones about how *important* art is. You know the type: usually artists. When they're not *actually* artists, they're gaunt, oppressively academic women who hurl words like *mesme* and *verberna*. When they're men, they write poems. Egads.

No, art isn't important. It's a luxury, not a necessity. Don't get me wrong; I like art. I like it a whole bunch sometimes. But I like canapés, too, and valet parking. And I could live quite easily without canapés.

Perhaps I feel the way I do because our society has become so shallow and wealthy and lazy and navel-gazing—and our art has mirrored it lazily and shallowly and self-servingly. It has been about as relevant as the canapés.

Not all art has to be political or in-one's-face. Beauty, for instance, has always been its own excuse. But most of the works offered by artists with nothing to say haven't even included beauty; they're just vomited onto canvas as some kind of self-fulfillment, so the artist can think of himself as an artist and thus avoid collating and filing—and a way to decorate one's living-room wall.

Two weeks ago, I saw two pleasantly, entertainingly creepy exhibits at Santa Ana's Grand Central Art Center. But remembering them now, with the recent events upon us, they are positively grim. One can't help but associate Naida Osline's "Deeper Skin" and the group exhibit "Drawing Towards an End" with death and charred dismemberment. They have no literal connection to the mayhem on the East Coast, but everything now is fraught with such associations.

Art star Paul McCarthy's frenetic works on paper are the most prescient—or at least they're the ones about which I'm still thinking. His *Nazi Cowboy* series features a spindly-armed tyrant crushing the world with his boots. He has hairy balls, and he touches his nipples (it's far tamer than any of

McCarthy's other works I've seen, which typically profile people making sweet love to meat). And now, at this remove, I remember him looking like Saddam Hussein.

The first in the series is the strongest and has the most assured lines. By the time we get to the third and fourth of the series, the paintings have already begun to be derivative of themselves. But there is one where the Nazi Cowboy has what looks to be the Eiffel Tower on his dick—if it isn't an oil derrick. Take your pick.

Liz Young's portraits are straightforward enough. The first two are reminiscent of the downtown artist Becca; *Baby* and *Liz Age 32* are large works on plywood. The baby has a bloody crotch.

The rest of Young's works are tiny portraits of grandmothers and old-timey moms and Young herself as a weird-looking little girl whose eyes are slightly off. In fact, all the people's eyes are slightly off, like the runner in the marathon mural near LAX.

All Young's portraits are painted in her own blood. When it dries, it cracks like a perfect mosaic.

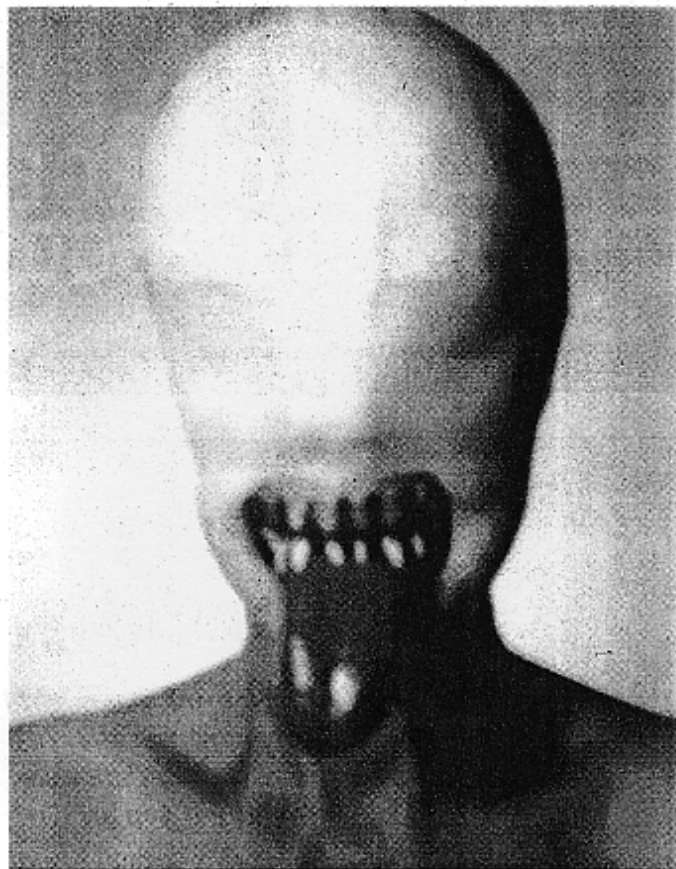
Only Franco Angeloni, the charming former artist-in-residence at Grand Central, fails this new test by drawing pink circles on flowered cotton. It says nothing and means nothing and has not even beauty or whimsy with which to distract us. Of course, it's not his fault. He didn't know how quickly our needs would change.

In a separate room, Naida Osline's disturbing Polaroids are tiny, skin-crawling works in which she has created people with horrifying

webbed skin and horned feet; she tatters a breast into hamburger meat, but its nipple is still perky and fine. Osline doesn't use digital manipulations, just good old-fashioned monster makeup. One man has a rat tail protruding from his belly like the creature about to explode

though we—shallow little things all—have all of a sudden grown up or at least are trying to. I don't know about you, but I have been guiltily reading every foreign news blurb I come across to atone for never having paid attention before.

I don't know how long



forth in *Alien*. Another has a gangrenous hand. Once, it was fun looking into someone's slightly kooky dreams; now it's horrifying. And that mirrors what I feel almost all the time now.

I've read and heard dozens of members of the commenting class—of which I am a member, so I, too, can avoid collating and filing—say that our world will never be the same after the recent ghastly attacks. They note that we are filling our churches; they recognize that we are driving more politely. They foresee a lasting gravity, as

our new piety will last. But perhaps, all of a sudden, our artists will have something to say.

And that's a worthwhile thing—a change to look forward to eagerly. In times of intense distress, art can be important. It can speak for us and to us. It can hinge on emotion or reason; it doesn't matter which. It can be forthrightly political, or it can just lay plain our swirling fears. And it can dive into whimsy or frivolity to pull us away from a constant, Seattle-like gloom. We've run from meaning long enough. ☐