

## ART

***ART; Saul Steinberg, Observer of America***

By William Zimmer

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A SHOW of work by Saul Steinberg is an automatic hit with all segments of the public. Susan Vogel, the director of the Yale University Art Gallery, has verified this by having a cross section of New Haven -- many from the Yale community, but other notable citizens as well -- compose wall labels for most of the 50 works from the collection of Sivia and Jeffrey Loria on view at the gallery.

The remarks do animate the proceedings, making the exhibition even more buoyant. Ms. Vogel goes first, writing about a swaggering souped-up taxi from 1948. She concludes her remarks with "Get in!"

From this early watercolor onward, it is remarkable how consistent Mr. Steinberg's style has been. All the major elements -- the cars, the streets, the odd mix of folk, the outlandish but somehow true to life buildings -- were there from the first, as verified by "Main Street" from 1953. Here the line may be more wispy than it became later, but the predilection for cramming in as much as possible is in evidence.

Some of the commentators reminisce about their own New York experiences, while others engage in iconographic readings of some of the more obviously symbol-laden pieces. "Taxi" from 1977 is a piling on of bulging yellow cabs. Pedestrians on the sidewalk are reduced to the size of mice.

About this drawing, Nicholas Pastore, the New Haven Chief of Police, begins by saying, "How refreshing for a police chief to be asked about something other than crime and punishment." But he goes on to say that he dislikes the piece because he sees these taxis as tanks and they hint at "institutionalized urban warfare."

Many of the drawings reveal Mr. Steinberg's unabashed love affair with art deco; the Chrysler building in particular undergoes many metamorphoses. But Paul Bass, associate editor of The New Haven Advocate, writes ruefully, "Big towers. Big footprints. Big shoes. Big egos built big buildings" His target is a 1979 drawing "Koch, Chrysler and Empire," featuring a variety of Steinbergian characters in fancifully decorated running shoes (but not far removed from actual shoes beginning to appear on the street that year). Mr. Bass continues, "Something was lost this time, though. The grace, the humor of art deco." Indeed Mr. Steinberg's once zestfully creative architecture has become in this drawing, and in many subsequent ones, almost pro forma.

How New York looks at the rest of the country has been a theme of Mr. Steinberg's since 1976 -- the Bicentennial year -- when he drew the "View of the World" that John Updike in his catalogue essay for this show says "covers the view westward from Manhattan to the drastically foreshortened rest of the world." This show not only has several preliminary drawings for that much-reproduced New Yorker cover, but also subsequent variations on it, including one in which the view is eastward from Lexington Avenue.

In this work the viewer goes around the world and winds up in Central Park. In another New Yorker cover, from 1992, "The American Corrida" a diminutive Uncle Sam as a matador faces a giant Thanksgiving turkey. The show includes four versions of this drawing. Richard C. Levin, the president of Yale, wonders at the end of his commentary, "Would we laugh if the sizes of Uncle Sam and the turkey were reversed?" But Frances T. Clark, executive director of the Arts Council of Greater New Haven, says tersely, "In the Arena of Life, Uncle Sam takes on the Speaker of the House whose true identity has finally been exposed."

Although the Romanian-born Mr. Steinberg is widely regarded as a keen observer of modern American mores, it's doubtful that he surfs the Net or even owns a computer. For the latest in technology applied to art, another exhibition in New Haven, "Reframing Tradition" at Creative Arts Workshop, fills the bill, at least in part.

It is a national competition judged by Susan Kismaric, curator in the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, and Tod Popageorge, a photography professor at Yale. In their statement in the show's brochure they say that the most interesting submissions were hand and computer-manipulated pictures as well as those that were staged and directed. But they also acknowledge a more standard direction. They reviewed "many compelling perceptions that a responding eye and camera can wrest from the shifting parade of the daily world."

They awarded first place honors to representatives from each camp. Using a computer, Petra Karadimas manipulated the heads of four different women. For "Luisa" she scribbled as if making a rough sketch, but with "Sonita" the features are almost effaced, as if her face has been modeled from a bar of soap.

From the parade of daily life, Kane A. Stewart shared top honors with palladium prints of the upper bodies of stalwart boxers. In the realm of documentary work Lelen Bourgoignie submitted three perceptive pictures from Romania. "Carousel," by Thomas Esser, is from the carnival of life. Riding fierce-looking wooden horses are a grim man and a happy little girl. Like the broad back of one of Mr. Stewart's fighters, a long exotic leaf, photographed by Russel M. Sasaki, looks like a back from which the skin has been stripped and the bands of muscles exposed. A strong sign that the natural world is still precious in the digitized era is Douglas Prince's "White Calf Near Capalbio." The show contains many richly colored photographs but none is as serene as Stephen Sollins's head of Botticelli's "Venus" hung on sunnily-patterned yellow wallpaper and reflected in an oval mirror. Given the judges' delineations, the show contains a lot of engrossing work.