

CICERO

“UNSEEN EVENTS”

Carmen Cicero had not yet decided on the right adjective to describe his big, bold, near-fatally beautiful, funnily dreamy new canvases, although he *had* been searching through some of his own suggestions, “trying to find out what kind of painting this is,” he said, in a reflective mood.

A painter does not necessarily need to know intellectually what he is doing visually. But Cicero is an extremely intelligent, self-aware, and art-aware kind of painter. “First, it’s existential—by which I mean, there’s a degree of alienation to it, a standing-back from the painting in a detached way.” Cicero proffers a few more words from a small piece of paper. “Romantic...evocative...slightly surreal...”

Then, suddenly, he hits on the first adjective upon which we both most totally concur: “Visionary?...”

“Visionary” means, among other interesting things, “unreal; imaginative.” Also interesting is the title Cicero has given—not entirely coincidentally—to this show of new work, “Unseen Events.”

But, wait. How can you hope, even in representational art, to paint—to see—the unseen, let alone make an event of it?

It has been going on in man’s religions for seeming eons. From primitive shamans to Egyptian priests to Attic priestesses to the three wise men to Merlin the magician to our Native Americans’ peyote-kited, animal-souled celestial spirit-journeys, visionaries—be they tribal, cultic, or artistic—have been passionately, sur-rationally involved in seeing what’s *not* there in the course of *un-seeing* what is. These last-named, mentally apprehended oxymorons are no more *emotionally* contradictory than our nighttime dreams; and the primary feat of visionaries is to dream dreams awake, another oxymoronic phrase that isn’t all that moronic. In soulful contrarities lie deep psychic truths. And, since the advent of a despiritualizing Industrial Revolution, in a once-very-materialistic Western art has sometimes lain a vision of better things.

Carmen Cicero takes his mission in stride; apart from his ever-evolving second sight, he is, we gather, perfectly sane, self-sufficient—and enjoyably garrulous. Indeed, in the course of a few moments’ gently excited conversation with the Newark-born painter, one learns quickly

that one of his favorite words of approbation *is* “exciting.”

Cicero, for instance, found his rambling loft in Manhattan’s Bowery district—which he shares with his wife, art historian Mary Abell—far more stimulating 25 years ago, when it was still *the* Bowery, rather than gentrified home to downwardly-mobile Yuppies and restaurant supply companies. “I once saw a man and woman making love out there, on the street!” the trim, robustly handsome ex-student of Robert Motherwell remarks. “When I moved here—from my big and very elegant space in Englewood, New Jersey—in 1972, it was Grimsville by comparison. Bums lying all over the place, people strung out on heroin. And SoHo was still an exciting place then!

“One night I heard a horrible banging sound—a bum was whacking tin-covered windows across the street with a six-foot pipe, making rents in them about a foot wide. Talk about angst!”

Cicero is characteristically good-hearted and funny about this last, but we *had* been talking about angst—not only existential angst of the Sartrean stripe, but the all-over, nothing-abiding, surface-shattering

angst of such Abstract Expressionist “innovators” as the aforementioned Motherwell, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning. I put “innovators” in quotes because Cicero—seldom anything less than candid—more or less does this himself, not counting himself among the founding fathers.

“I went to Newark State Teachers College—now Kean College—in the late ‘40s with Abstract Expressionists, serious artists, Frank Roth, Babe Shapiro, George Mueller, all of whom got into very good New York galleries. I instantly *became* an Abstract Expressionist. It was an exciting period. You went into a gallery and saw what was on the walls, and your heart started to beat.”

But, although he later was to share his New York gallery, Peridot, with many soon-to-be Action-Painting luminaries, Carmen Cicero seems, in some way, even then, to have known better than to shackle himself to Abstract Expressionism’s “anxious object” forever. Although the careers thus obtained may have been stellar *and* international, the personal results seemed often to be alcoholism-beyond-Alcoholics-Anonymous, suicide or early death.

Even after a successful first show in 1957 at Peridot Gallery and