

after Cicero's paintings had been included—among the works of such luminaries as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Josef Albers, Sam Francis, Paul Klee, Adolph Gottlieb, Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock—in super-curator James Johnson Sweeney's 1959 Guggenheim inaugural exhibition, Cicero was, as it were, beginning to feel the aesthetic pinch, as well as a far-beyond-seven-year itch to transit out of an all-devouring, all-consuming, ultra-painterly, thereby ultra-personal, style.

So, the artist went in for some "innovation" of his own: perhaps, to outexperiment the experimentalists, Cicero, with no great stealth, but with a great deal of aesthetic dering-do, brought his own evolving sense of the figurative back to bear upon his—and mid-century America's—painting. It's there, evolving and revolving before one's eyes in such '60s canvases as the iconoclastically imagistic *Cowboys*, two black-and-white tornadoes of roiling movement *and* human bearing. Cicero dubbed the new format—in a bow both to Abstract Expressionism and to the images it had excluded from contemporary art—*figurative expressionism*.

Soon, Cicero was showing at

Peridot regularly, and his very often black-and-white paintings were to be viewed in six Whitney Museum Annuals. Nor did he mind his being eventually represented in the permanent collections of such wildly august institutions as New York's Metropolitan Museum and its Museum of Modern Art, Brooklyn's Brooklyn Museum, and the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC.

Then utter disaster—even Greek tragedy—struck. It was the sort of horrific happenstance to make a lesser soul—of lesser inner strength—have the very first of many nervous breakdowns, or summarily commit suicide.

To put it bluntly, in 1971, Cicero's studio in Englewood burned to the ground. The unwonted, unwanted and thoroughly unwarranted conflagration took with it some 40 canvases, old and new, all of the painter's visuals, his press clips and reviews, a pet jazz saxophone, and a valuable antique-toy collection, among other cherished things. *Unlike* a Greek tragic hero, however, Cicero was not *angry* with any haplessly incendiary gods: he was, he said, "despondent," and wondered absently, into the near-void, if he should begin

again, or take up where he left off. How continue with his calling, his life, his *vision*, when any continuity had been brutally terminated?

Then his "will-to-life"—as Friedrich Nietzsche might have phrased this entirely secular "conversion" experience—began to assert itself more and more strongly. This was 20th-century America, after all, and he was *not* a Greek anti-hero, not even Hamlet, much less a character out of Chekhov. Cicero *could* continue, even triumph, triumph perhaps through that very continuance, and beyond.

Then, during the very early 1980s, something changed. Through something greater than self-will—call it self-inspiration, and much hard work—Cicero's personal painterly idiom flowered, inevitably and naturally, into a transpersonal figurative language.

Soon, the sea change was becoming a pleasure cruise. Cicero had self-transformed into a kind of social realist with a moral conscience dedicated only to wonder. *Street Dancer* is nimbly merry, featuring an aerially contorting figure in bright harlequin's garb agog in gymnastic excess. *Running Scared* gave us a good-looking blockheaded young

guy taking it on the nocturnal lam diagonally down the block, fleeing the law—or maybe the law of himself—against small cityscape against midnight blue sky replete with tiny full moon. The artist had begun dreaming on-canvas, much to our benefit.

To put it another way: Cicero's work of the 1980s was flatly, fleetly oracular. Compare "oracular"—which more or less means "public divining"—with the more self-communing, hide-in-plain-sight dreaming of his works from the later '90s, on hand—and very dynamical so—in this exhibition. The trick to visionary painting, of course, is to make dreams accessible *through* the very act of seeing them to canvas. Past masterworks of the genre have run from Goya's halcyon Spanish nightmares to Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot's tradition-haunted Barbizon woods to 19th-century American Albert Pynkham Ryder's sublime cartoons of the soul.

And now we have among us a latter-day practitioner of this whitest of artistic magics, who has—all instinctively, yet with much art-historical and human knowledge—learned along with the greats that the more outer economy to the vision, the