

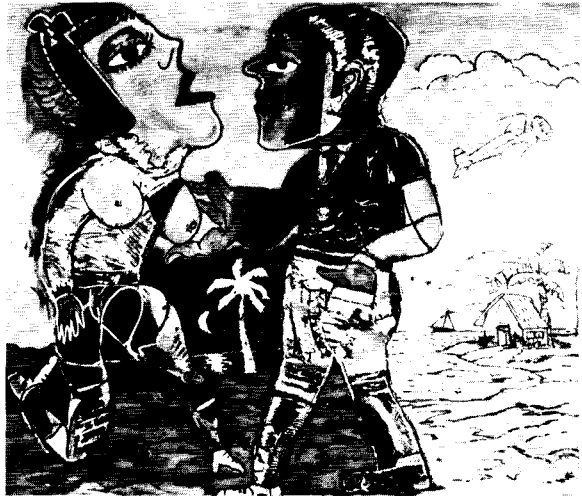
## CARMEN CICERO

For Carmen Cicero, it has been a long patient wait for the rest of the world to catch up with him. He is not alone. One can think of several other artists—including Philip Guston—who left abstraction in the late 60s and began doing a “funky” figuration that is so much in vogue these days, and who were ridiculed until the art world finally modified its exclusively formalist point of view.

The body of works exhibited at Graham Modern have come out of the last nine years or so. They were executed after Cicero’s studio and all its contents were completely destroyed by fire in 1971. While this catastrophe would stump the critic or the art historian, it certainly does not mean that the artist does not continue and start anew, often with startling results, as seen in the case of Alfred Leslie, who went through a similar experience. These works are not discontinuous with Cicero’s works of the 1950s and 60s. Reminiscences of the earlier, gestural figural style can be observed and one can discern the persistence of an underlying cubist structure. And, characteristic of a generation of artists who were influenced by Hans Hofmann’s inimitable way of transmitting modernist ideas, the work contains a sense of formal punning and references. The tactile, visceral surfaces that he shared with such contemporaries as a Leon Golub, have also survived in the recent paintings, effecting a nice bridge to the work of the current generation of figurative artists.

The new work is replete with a tough, wry wit that veers towards, but never quite becomes, hostility. It is that type of humor we are accustomed to calling “biting.” It is also combative and rebellious, and defiant in its unrepentant exposure of the raw emotion that lies just beneath the veneer of civilization. This point of view has certainly been shaped by Cicero’s long-time residence on the Bowery, where he migrated after the fire and the collapse of his personal life. The transition there from a more conventional and comfortable life in the suburbs to what was then the frontier of the downtown art world, certainly shaped the sardonic fatalism of his work which has only recently begun to be modified. One of the best examples can be seen in “Death Hails a Cab” (see Page 10) where death is seen on the piers in the early morning hailing a taxi. It is a completely contemporary allegory in its deadpan approach to devastation. It makes sense that the apocalyptic forces would not necessarily come on horseback in a blaze of light in this age. Horses are obsolete and star war movies have made us blasé to the dazzling effects of light. Now, it is much more sinister when the destroyer mills among us, unknown, doing its work piecemeal, letting us drop off one by one quietly. And then, like a dracula, it will flee the early morning light by what else? A cab.

While Cicero will attribute the macabre, visionary and surreal aspects in his work to the haunting vision of a Ryder, and, dare we suggest, a Blake or a Fuseli, for me it is the sly devious humor of James Thurber that is called to mind in encountering Cicero’s compositions. Perhaps it is because Cicero’s subjects include the cast of characters in the most enduring battle of all times—that between the sexes, and he depicts them in a variety of interactions: love, hate, lust, violence, and above all drama. But like Thurber’s indomitable adversaries, Cicero’s are always equal in the fray. There are no victims, no underdogs. This factor is all the more interesting



*Flying Down to Rio*, 1982. Acrylic on canvas; 72 x 84"

because, like any male of his generation, Cicero’s feelings on the contemporary situation between men and women are contradictory. He may be put off by the current female prototypes, which are quite different from those he knew growing up, but he can’t help but persist in finding salvation in the same woman he fears. The narratives in these works can be seen as allegories for situations he has been in, various states of mind, and above all as vehicles for him to work out all these feelings. His incurable romanticism comes out in a composition such as “Flying Down To Rio” (see above) where he mimics the worst kind of sentimentality and cliché, complete with the hot, nubile woman rushing bare breasted to the cool, smouldering Latin-type under the palm trees and a tropical moon. Don Ameche, Cesar Romero, Rosario Brazzi where are you?

But—lest we be side-tracked by the subject matter—let us note that the same compositions are amazingly complex and rigorous in terms of their spatial organization. The contours of his figures become not only a means to delineate shapes, but spatial devices that establish visually what the relationships will be to the shape next to it. This is all the more provocative because one can see painted space but have it denied by what is actually happening visually or coloristically.

Cicero also does collages that have a direct relationship to those formal concerns. He considers the collages complete when they have some of the qualities that direct the imagery of the paintings. In his own words, “there is a prevailing light, a prevailing atmosphere... they look slightly apparitional... the color is somewhat dreamlike....” As he does with his paintings, he works on several collages at a time. He assembles the different compositions around the perimeter of his table, with a pile of torn paper scraps in the middle. He places and replaces the scraps on all the compositions simultaneously.

The ordering of the geometric shapes in the collages is similar to the shapes and interstices that are evident in the paintings. Cicero is able to explore the actual nature of the relationship between the shapes of the figural works in the collages. As he changes the placement of the color shapes in each collage, he observes how the atmosphere and the local