

ART

Exuberance Coupled With Insight

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

CARMEN CICERO, a native of Newark, had his work displayed in the Guggenheim Museum's inaugural exhibition in 1959 in the company of stellar artists including Joan Miró, who later sent Mr. Cicero an original drawing saluting the young artist.

Mr. Cicero's career was blossoming until his Weehawken studio burned down in 1971. He had to start all over again, and this exhibition of his paintings from the 1970's and 80's, through Tuesday at the Montclair State College Art Gallery, shows Mr. Cicero to be a phoenix. He lives in Manhattan now, and his exuberance and steely insight into urban life obviously survived the flames.

It is not hard to see what Miró admired in Mr. Cicero's art. He works in a style he calls Figurative Expressionism; these figures are elastic and chameleon-like and perhaps could not have existed without the breakthroughs made by European Surrealists. Mr. Cicero's palette is also very rich, including blunt and declarative primary colors as well as pastels. He has a tendency to outline in black.

His art immediately recalls that of Red Grooms, but the thoroughness of his investigations of urban life seems to have made Mr. Grooms mean-spirited; rather than celebrating his subject matter, Mr. Grooms derides it. In contrast, Mr. Cicero is never cynical. If things get too unspeakable for him, he veers off into a bithe kind of Surrealism, a style that is less easily digested than his more straightforward painting. In these cases — the piece "Prince Charming" is an example — the viewer has to more or less decipher the painting.

For this show, the curator, Lorenzo Pace,

Urban life and movies, topics in rich colors.

who is also the gallery director, has chosen an especially sunny keynote, "Provincetown Princess." A Lorelei grins at us; she is paired with an ominous rock formation, but both water and sky are carefree blue. Whoever heeds this siren, however, is in for a bumpy ride.

The viewer next encounters "Mr. Ghost Goes to Town," one of the first of several paintings showing that Mr. Cicero loves the movies. A very white male figure in cowboy regalia is kneeling so that he fills the frame. The index finger on one hand is pointed like a pistol. This is an embodiment of the White Knight myth that one does not quite trust.

"Flying Down to Rio" introduces us to Mr. Cicero's complex view of sexual relationships. Both the amorous pilot and the woman he holds in thrall wear masks of heavy makeup. Life isn't as breezy as the title might suggest.

Next in the exhibition comes the best large painting, which is something of a tour de force. "Crime" is a gangster figure, with gun blazing, who occupies the entire canvas. But the surface of the painting is covered with abstract strings of paint, reminiscent of a classic Jackson Pollock painting. By concocting this entangling environment for his bad guy to fight his way out of, Mr. Cicero has created an atmosphere parallel to those for

which crime novelists strive.

"Battle of the Sexes" in which knives are made equal to phalluses, is too murky to be a good painting. And for the surreal "Prince Charming," the viewer is given no obvious story line; But this elusive work contains some fine passages, like the simple outline profile of a figure whose garb is patterned with small color blocks reminiscent of abstract painting by Mondrian.

Compared with these samples of Mr. Cicero's works, which are from the 1970's and early 80's, the more recent work evinces a deepening in his art. For one thing, he has mastered watercolor, as clearly demonstrated by "The Pond." A boxy automobile is parked by a pond in surroundings that might have been painted by Charles Burchfield. A hard yellow light from its headlamp beams into a small body of water. We are in hard-boiled-detective country, where richness and ambiguity easily coexist.

Mr. Cicero has also tried his hand at collage. In "Susanna and the Elders," the biblical account is portrayed as if it were a gangster story. The artist uses very limber collage effects and a sinuous line that were certainly inspired by Renare Bearden.

A portrait of Dracula dates to 1981, when there was a craze for this particular fiend. But it is detailed and specific in a way that is unusual for Mr. Cicero. More surprising, and perhaps a portent, is "Steppenwolf," from 1989. This visage is a bizarre pattern predominantly of orange and green. It is directly indebted to German Expressionism, and what Mr. Cicero terms his Figurative Expressionism could be joining its richest source with this painting.

The show can be seen at the College Art Gallery, in Life Hall at Montclair State, tomorrow and Tuesday from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M.



"Provincetown Princess," an acrylic on canvas by Carmen Cicero.