

CARMEN CICERO

RECENT PAINTINGS

Over the decades, viewers of Carmen Cicero's powerful paintings have admired the way they provoke the imagination and produce a special resonance. His current audiences are also impressed by the timeliness of these unnerving works, and especially by the way they invoke film noir, gothic mysteries, an information age accumulation of references and a postmodern attitude toward memory.

Something ambiguous, yet intellectually challenging, is always happening in Cicero's paintings.

In *Stalled*, for example, a driver wearing a fedora sits alone in a 1930's-style car that straddles a moonlit empty road. In *Tintoretto's Sleigh*, four figures flee through separate archways surrounding St. Mark's Square.

Timelessly robed, they look like they might have just stepped from the façade of the ornate church centrally placed in the background.

Such frozen action moments have a cinematic quality. Indeed, it is striking to note how many Cicero paintings have parallels with characteristics commonly associated with a film frame, particularly in the use of engaging, yet unresolved narrative. A recurring cloak-and-dagger type figure serves as a principal actor in a number of the Cicero dramas: he is a shadowy stalker in *Penthouse*, and a swift runner dashing along a deserted road in *The Grand Mountain* and on a frozen river in *Ruisdael Enigma*.

While there is a focus on the emotion of the subject, Cicero mediates and shapes, looking for that important edge between emotions that are depicted and those that are generated by the viewer.

Technical and mechanical aspects reinforce these parallels with cinema. Artificial, stage-like illumination varies to suit the mood Cicero chooses for each scene. This lighting can be intense,

and is always a factor contributing to the well-made, well-crafted, all-of-a-piece surface, which, like film, directs attention to the action rather than to the author's hand.

The ominous, unsettling atmosphere in Cicero's paintings certainly call to mind the forbidding tensions and the eerie but believable terrains commonly associated with film noir. Frequently the anxiety he creates feels very much of our time, for it involves blending appropriated images with familiar reality. One often intervenes with the other: a plumed medieval soldier's helmet inserted into a serene view of a Cape Cod inlet, or a mysterious 20th century figure in trench coat running through a 17th century Dutch cityscape based on a Jacob Ruisdael painting. As he invents austere, disturbing scenes, Cicero intentionally compromises both nature and memory, challenging and expanding conventional belief systems.