

# Unrepentant Realists Have Their Day



Eli Levin and Robert Cenedella: Still interested in the social issues, after all these years

Photo by Nancy Stone

By WENDY WILSON

In most walks of life, occasions that mark a celebration of 20 years' work are often times for platitudes and gold watches. But the 20-year retrospective of Eli Levin, a Santa Fe resident since 1964, and Robert Cenedella, a New Yorker and long-time friend of Levin's, at Ernesto Mayans Gallery (601 Canyon Road) held other kinds of meaning for them.

For one, more than 1,000 people—friends and Canyon Road tourists—showed up to see a show that really was different for Santa Fe. For another, the exhibit, which will be up through July 19, clarified the early parts of both artists' careers and pointed to new directions for each.

Levin is best known for his down-home paintings of people, rowdy and stuporous, in bars, and for his pointed social comments

on the art community here. Cenedella's paintings have political as well as social messages, and although both criticize the way people act in certain situations, Cenedella does it with a crowded canvas and twice as many figures. They both tend to be social rebels who paint subjects that others won't touch, but Cenedella's color scheme is garish and his figures more distorted. While Cenedella's works are mildly political, Levin's are mildly uproarious.

The stylistic relationship is not coincidental. The Levin-Cenedella connection goes a long way back, beginning with their graduation from New York's prestigious High School of Music and Art in 1958.

Cenedella went on to study for several winters with George Grosz, a satirical painter who fled Nazi Germany and was teaching at the Art Students' League.

Levin spent two years studying with social realist painter Raphael Soyer. In 1960 Levin and Cenedella had a two-man show in Woodstock, Vt. About 1961, the two found themselves in studios a block apart, on 49th and 50th Streets off Second Avenue, and they developed a close relationship. In 1964, Levin decided to break with New York City and all his former ties and to look for a new place to live.

He left the city, riding out West on a motorcycle in search of Shangri-La. After three weeks, he found Santa Fe, and made a choice he does not regret.

Two winters ago, Levin returned to New York City for several months and found that Cenedella, like him, had retained the same artistic interest—essentially, social realism. "I brought Cenedella's catalog back with me, and everyone said how much alike our work is," Levin said. Mayans, who

handles Levin's work, decided to give them a show together.

A major concern for such realists is how the abstract expressionist movement hurt their careers, and it isn't hard to understand why realist painters would be unwelcome guests in New York City in the early 1960s. "Abstract expressionism got in the way," Levin recalled. World War II had wiped out realism in art, and flat, no-image painting was the order of the day for hundreds of days. Jackson Pollack was king, and no gallery would look at the slides of a realist painter.

"It became the gospel," Levin said of abstract expressionism. "All we realists wanted was an equal slice of the pie, but we didn't get it. It was all or nothing then." The realist movement Levin and Cenedella had hoped to start turned out to be a two-artist one.

Cenedella, though, did pull off a widely publicized show in a Madison Avenue gallery. It was called "Yes Art," and it made fun of Andy Warhol and others. He bought real Brillo boxes from the manufacturer and sold them for \$5 flat and \$6.95 assembled. It was the only gallery that ever gave out S & H Green Stamps.

There is a good deal of predictable bitterness among the realist artists who got pushed out of the way by the abstract steamroller, artists who feel their development was stifled by a lack of feedback and encouragement. And there is a whole generation of artists without formal training in drawing and other fundamentals, because abstract expressionists taught in the art schools.

Some important realists left New York during that time, like Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, who were irritated by the lack of interest in their work. George Grosz is another. In 1959 Grosz said art was dead and prepared to return to Germany. Explained Cenedella, "He said, 'I came to America to paint, and they chop off my right arm. You might as well paint with your feet.'" At Grosz's retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1949, sales were only \$2,300. It finished him. Yet Grosz is now considered one of the great artists of the

20th century.

Levin took one course with Grosz, and has fond memories of the artist's coming to his defense during a weekly class critique. Levin had drawn a silly face and tacked it upside down. Grosz told the class, "You think this guy's a jerk. But I think he's gutsy. He's thinking and experimenting."

Several Cenedella paintings recall those times. The 1962, "Gallery Opening," shows Raphael Soyer, Levin and Cenedella at an art opening where dead realist paintings are tied up and hung on walls as art. Another pays homage to Grosz, the 1962 "Behold the Child," a reference to Grosz's famous book "Ecce Homo." Another 1962 painting brings up the mysterious circumstances of Grosz's death. He was found at

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