

ISOLATED IN THE SUBURBS

Santa Clara / Alfred Jan

The term "irony" has been frequently applied to certain kinds of current figurative painting. In New York, artists such as Ken Goodman, Richard Bosman and David Salle make paintings based on appropriated images from the media and popular culture, drawing from sources such as comic books, pornographic photographs, pulp magazines and trashy novels. Their paintings, rendered in flat shapes and with a limited palette, possess a cool pop sensibility that is ironic because its purposely deadpan attitude is linked to a belief in the futility of trying to create an original painterly expression. In contrast to this, many artists in the Bay Area use figuration to explore the ironic absurdities in our personal relationships and our urban, suburban and resort environments. Color is freely manipulated, resulting in hot, active paintings rather than detached ones. Whimsy and humor also play an integral role in the work of say, Robert Yarber, who worked here for some years, or M. Louise Stanley; in their work, psychological tension inevitably runs just beneath the surface.

Valerie Patten, another Bay Area artist, mainly paints women who are strangely isolated in suburbia. Her new work on exhibit at the de Saisset Museum continues to document "personal fictions," bits of impressions taken from real life and transformed into quirky visions. Just as Yarber's nocturnal interpersonal dramas occur in resort hotels, Patten's night scenes are placed in settings that accentuate their emotional intensity. Her women,



Valerie Patten, *Projected Eclipse*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 48"x 60", at de Saisset Museum, University of Santa Clara, Santa Clara.

however, are usually alone, with their backs toward the viewer. If their faces are visible, the details are indistinct, and if two of them are together, they seem to avoid eye contact, staring blankly ahead. Several, about to ring doorbells, appear to be uncertain about what awaits them on the other side. Just as alienation is at the opposite extreme from the ideal of happy family life, Patten's exaggerated garish in-

teriors conflict with stereotypes of typical suburban homogeneity. Clothes are bright purple or magenta, and curtains, wallpaper, carpets and bedspreads have bright colors and punkish patterns, diminishing any individual located within the space.

The most successful pieces include an incongruity. In *4:00am: Lost Object*, two women with flashlights stand stiffly in a

backyard next to a greenhouse; the jagged shapes of its door's broken glass panes are echoed by clouds overhead in the night sky. *Walk around the Block #2: Graveyard of Sunglasses* is a night scene in which a woman is about to knock on the front door of a house; the lawn in the foreground is littered mysteriously with sunglasses whose frames are yellow, red, blue and green. Why are they there? All does not look right in suburbia. In *Projected Eclipse*, one of the few daytime pieces, we see an eclipse of the sun projected into the room from an unseen window in the viewer's direction, but the result is optically questionable. A small image of the eclipse appears in a facing mirror, and a large, sculptured-looking one shows up on the left. One source could not produce two different images in this fashion. Characteristically, a woman sits on the bed with her back toward the viewer, and the room itself contains very unusual accessories.

Less successful paintings do not transcend the banality that Patten attempts to depict ironically. In *Hawaiian Shirt*, the shirt worn by a man with mismatched eyes is gaudy but does not go far enough. The faces of Patten's men are awkwardly painted—for example, the face of the man leaving a trail of peanut shells on the counter in *Nervous Snack*. Men dominate these two paintings, and much of the tension between the figure and its surroundings is lost. Nevertheless, Patten's strong paintings are simultaneously disturbing and humorous as they examine suburban life in new ways. □