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[Michael Hurson](#)

[Paula Cooper Gallery | 529 West 21st Street](#)

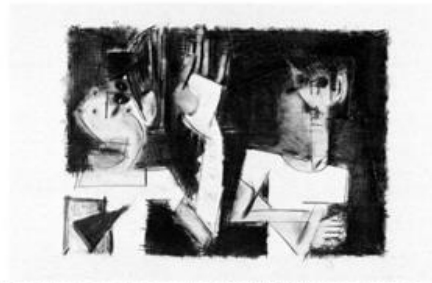
Michael Hurson's portrait drawings ought to be the easiest things to write about, so sociable, so garrulous do they appear. But they are not easy to write about at all. I think (and the tentativeness that is at the heart of Hurson's work enforces a reciprocal uncertainty) that this is because the drawings are somehow fugitive, so almost not there that the crude formulations of critical language seem overbearing, threatening to lock them within impossibly immobile interpretations.

What is most remarkable about Hurson's work is its fluidity. It is not simply that he is extremely fluent in his means, although he does have great technical and stylistic facility. It is also that he has the flexibility of mind to move from medium to medium, from painting to model-building to writing to drawing—a nervous string of activities which share only a sense that identity is somehow constituted from an awareness of style and presentation. And it is also that he has the ambition to find art-making possibilities in small, supposedly unambitious activity. In short it is a probing restlessness that sets Hurson's work apart from so much of today's full-speed-ahead, do-it-first, ask-questions-later production.

The decision to make portraits was a stroke of brilliance. At once Hurson was able to solve the thorny problems that plague all artists, problems like subject matter and cash support—after all, if you commission a portrait, you guarantee both. Which freed Hurson to deal with the more abstract notion of representation as such, of the ways we see the world and ourselves within it. By presenting this exploration in discursive terms—many “studies” contributing to a final statement which is not so much an end as a culmination—Hurson demonstrates how we try on styles in our daily lives, demonstrates one of the most abiding connections between esthetic activity and ordinary, day-to-day goings-on. The portrait drawings are dramatizations of style, and of the constraints it imposes on our vision.



Lothal Lambert, *The Nightmare Woman*, 1961, scenes from film.



Michael Hurson, *Portrait of Nicholas and Lucas Cooper #10*, 1981, pencil, pastel, conté, and gouache on paper, 26 x 40 1/2"

start, launches into a gyrating rendition of the kind of heart-rending ballad that accompanies much of the film: "This is me. This is my life." During this song we see her transformed into the powerfully staged figure which can contain her narcissism. The accelerated editing alternates facial closeups with narrative flashbacks, leaving the slow particularities of life and rushing into a seductively economic encapsulation. Using strategies of display similar to those of TV advertising footage, this ending offers the viewer a sleek synopsis, a kind of characterological tourism; the constant return to Beate's face is like the commercial's return to its logo, and this face, this logo, dominates this short passage of virtuoso filmmaking. Perhaps the last scene brought out the best in the director because he understood that the resuscitation of the logo (in this case the female of his perfection, the woman named nightmare) is the guarantor of his pleasure.

—BARBARA KRUGER

MICHAEL HURSON, Paula Cooper; JOHN CLARK, 49th Parallel:

MICHAEL HURSON

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JOHN CLARK

If Hurson's work has a deceptive ap-

pearance, seeming less ambitious than it really is, then something similar might be said of the paintings of John Clark. But the terms should be reversed. The paintings look ambitious, they are big, bright, confident in their painterliness; but they are extremely timid in conception.

At their best they are recordings of local detail—a doorframe, perhaps, or the silhouette of an old-fashioned factory standing against the sky. Local detail with a certain nostalgic blush to it, a sentimentality emphasized by the lush paint as much as by the schematic allusion to a newsboy barking out the evening's headlines that crops up in several of the canvases. In fact, the work is full of allusions of one sort or another, mostly of the sort that is supposed to cue the viewer to understand that this is "important" art—references to Constructivist graphic design, for example, or, in another piece, to van Gogh painting at night with candles in his hat (Oh, those Expressionist painters, what a crazy lot!) But Clark lacks the brash self-confidence of those painters, European and American, whom he obviously wishes to emulate. He mentions past glories, calls attention to the correct mythologies, but pulls back from the outright identification that might give his work some bite. Timorous quotation of the right stuff is no longer enough—painters who still believe in what they are doing have to eat it whole. Because if they don't swallow it, who will?

—THOMAS LAWSON

"This Side of Paradise," Concord Contemporary Art:

At a time when style is vexed by the

specter of its own superfluity, artists' impulses toward universality must find some other anchor, some other point of departure from which to speak. Religious mythology provides a foothold in tradition, arbitrating the artwork's passage from personal to public speech. Though Western art in this century has spoken a primarily secular language, it longs to carry the cultural and psychological weight provided by the narratives and symbolism of the Old and New Testaments, as this recent show amply proved. The six artists exhibited approached their subject in a variety of ways; overall, though content rather than adherence to a group esthetic was the curatorial starting point, the dominance of intense color and frequently awkward execution (there were, of course, exceptions) suggested an expressionistic revivalism carefully spiced with kitsch and pop. Nonetheless the work managed to remain individual, avoiding subjugation to arbitrarily constituted isms.

The stereotyping of women resulting from Christian lore was dogmatically treated in Katherine Sherwood's installation of about 30 small paintings. One wall of the gallery was covered in daubs of dark red and sienna; here Sherwood hung her would-be primitive paintings of "Saints and Aggressive Women" in all-over 19th century salon fashion, unifying these schizophrenic hagiographies within one frame (the wall itself). Many of the paintings contain inscriptions telling their subjects' stories in language appropriate to their categories. The saints, of course, are all virgins (or victims), and the "aggressive women" thus sinners by implication. The

John Clark

49th Parallel

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—[*Thomas Lawson*](#)