

RAY TURNER: PÖP YE-L' SHEN

SKOTIA GALLERY
150 EAST MARCY STREET, SANTA FE

"When I look in your eyes I see nobody other than me."

—Bob Dylan, from *Modern Times*

Human connection is the purpose of art. Communication, expression, ideation—they all add up and pare down to connection.

The academic can define art as a site for the creation of cultural meaning, but culture is whatever connects people, and meaning is always contingent, socially contextual, and primarily a human habit. If a meaning flings itself into the forest and nobody is there to get it then it isn't really meaningful at all. Rocks and trees are blessed with not needing to be meaningful to be, but humans have no such luck. Absolutely vital for our survival is the need to mean something to somebody and/or to the culture at large.

Ray Turner's ongoing portrait project grasps these fundamental realities and fleshes them out in oil paint in a wondrously pleasant way. Absolutely straightforward and simple in conception, this show shines in the details of content. Each head is painted on a twelve-inch square of glass mounted on a flatly painted wood panel. The beauty of this technique is that the portraits exist against flat "pop art" grounds that, no matter how bright, remain seated behind the sitter. The virtue of the glass as surface is that Turner can easily wipe away the wet paint at the edges of each head, and since the glass will go over one of his color swatch panels he is freed to concentrate on portraiture, capturing a likeness, the volume of the form, rather than worrying about how to integrate the face with the background. The result is a series of images that are both timeless and completely particular. Turner is best known for his landscape work, and in a sense these strong images are topographies

of the visage. Add a remarkable painterly technique and an intense sense of intimacy and individualism that emanates from each image and you've got a wall of people in all shapes, ages, colors, and sizes that reads like an essay in humanism. Turner's naturalism finds the perfect pitch between pure paint and picture over and over again. He started with Joe, an older man who used to live with him and whom the artist describes as a grandfather figure. After Joe he turned to people he knows and then occasional baseball players and other artists, obviously working from life as much as possible, but presumably relying on photographs from the past as needed. In testament to Turner's talent it is impossible to distinguish between these various sources.

In the Skotia exhibition a figure that seems to be Jackson Pollock sits alone on one wall confronting and contemplating a grid of other individuals. This is a perfect curatorial move and suggests, along with the elegant interior, that Skotia will be a gallery well worth watching as time goes by. Each person depicted here expresses an inner presence. There are kids who look like they're about to laugh, women who possess stateliness or grandeur that is inexplicable, men who have seen too much and appear world-weary. There are stocking-capped adolescents who confront us and thick-necked athletes whose interiors seem hidden in shadow. Some look at us quizzically while others look instead into the near distance with a sense of quiet satisfaction. These are people being people in all variety of mood and intensity.

All transcend any tendency towards stereotype. They smile, they smirk, and they subtly scowl. They knit their brows or simply stop and stare. Maybe these works should be required reading for our political leaders and social elitists who would run the middle-class of this country into the ground. We badly need again a government that is truly by and for the people. I'm not saying that Turner has a political axe to grind here. He's just connecting. But if you believe in the primacy and importance of art then you believe in the primacy and importance of people. Nothing matters more than human connection. Make that your guiding principle and the rest will fall into place. We are all in this together. These are old ideas, but Ray Turner's outstanding series of portraits makes them profoundly fresh and new. In other words, he brings them all to life.

JON CARVER



Ray Turner, *McClain*, oil on glass, 12" x 12"