

Raphael Soyer '20 Great Paintings' Forum Gallery 745 Fifth Avenue (near 57th Street) Through March 4

The two paintings that open this mini-survey of Raphael Soyer's career -- one of tired waitresses in a restaurant, the other a portrait of his parents -- succinctly establish his main themes: on-the-spot social observation and personal history set forth in a deft figurative style.

He was born in Russia in 1899 and immigrated to the United States, which really meant to New York. The city is a piquant presence in much of his work, from images of bright red, horse-drawn Surprise Laundry trucks lined up under an East River bridge, to office workers window-shopping for hats during their lunch hour, to sad-looking men dozing on benches in Union Square.

Soyer has an affectionate sense of the ridiculous, evident in his cartoonish "Dancing Lesson," with its plump couple locked in a clinch before an at-home audience of an elderly lady holding a Yiddish newspaper and a boy playing a harmonica. And his casually sensuous images of dancers and models are affecting.

But the best paintings here are the ones that show him at his grandest and his most intimate. "Imaginary Wall in My Studio" (1945) is a valentine of a painting, with its trompe l'oeil rendering of a wall on which are pinned sketches of friends and a drawing of "Fluffy the Cat" by his young daughter.

And across the room is the large-scale "Homage to Thomas Eakins" (1964-65), a group portrait, in the style of Fantin-Latour, of artists and writers whom Soyer knew. In it, Edward Hopper (in a sea-green suit), Edwin Dickinson, Reginald Marsh (who had died in 1954) and the art historian Lloyd Goodrich are arranged before the great American realist's "Gross Clinic" (1875).

By the time of Soyer's painting, however, American realism was long out of favor, and the competitive, high-stakes New York art world was radically different from the era when he could effortlessly integrate friends and family, street and studio, glamour and squalor in a single body of work. This democratic neighborliness remains a lovely feature of this work, a sense of a benign but watchful eye lovingly touching the world around it. HOLLAND COTTER