

Raphael Soyer's Steadfast Gaze

At the Hirshhorn, an art that is embraced in lawful wedlock

He has produced almost as many self-portraits as Rembrandt, who painted himself 60 times. The first face of Raphael Soyer is dated 1917. The artist printed it on a sheet of cheap paper with engraving plates he heated on the gas burner in the family kitchen in The Bronx. Though coarsely crosshatched, its composition a tad askew, the engraving is a riveting reflection of the artist at 18, staring at the mirror with the same unswerving, enigmatic gaze that he would cast upon the world for the next 60-odd years of self-portraiture. By 1920 Soyer had a lithographic crayon firmly in hand. With strong, fluid strokes, he sketched a head of singular beauty: a mass of black curls resting on an inverted triangle, the faintly protruding ears pointing downward toward the chin, the eyes shrouded but intent, as always.

The beauty of the self-portraits would scarcely endure a decade. Soon Soyer was accenting the oddities of his features, while adding elements of costume that gave some of the pictures an air of caricature. His ears stood out more boldly and grew pointier, while a cone-shaped hat made him look like a solemn-eyed Chico Marx. When Soyer produced vast New York City street scenes in the late 1950s, he painted himself in a business suit, shirt and tie and posed, immobile, amid the crowds that passed through his pictures. In 1959 he pulled his glasses onto his forehead, and, in a rare gesture of self-revelation, put himself in the company of

the masters who inspired him, entitling the improbable work *Self-Portrait with Self-Portraits of Rembrandt, Corot and Degas*. Returning to a busy Manhattan street for one of his most recent paintings, he once again plays the role of the bystander. Dressed in the now familiar gray suit and Chico hat, arms hanging loosely—perhaps helplessly—at his sides, the artist looks searchingly at the viewer, who is his alter ego. The 1980 picture is called *Quo Vadis*.

Quo Vadis? The question is superfluous. Where Raphael Soyer is going has never been in doubt. His self-portraits have been emblematic of both his personal detachment from his subjects and the lonely course he has undeviatingly pursued in an era that was long dominated by abstract art. How steadfast he

has remained is demonstrated by the show of 17 paintings, "Soyer Since 1960," currently at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., together with a 146-piece exhibit of engravings and lithographs entitled "Sixty-Five Years of Printmaking." Judging from the paintings, Soyer, who is 82, has spent the past two decades in vigorous reaffirmation of his credo that "art must communicate, it must represent, it must describe and express people, their lives and times." As he grows older, the Russian-born master of American realism has undertaken ever larger canvases, while seeking more brilliant colors that might better represent the truth as he sees it.

His magisterial *Homage to Thomas Eakins* exemplifies the boldness, not to say the rashness, with which Soyer has reached into the past for forms that have faded away after a century or more of desuetude. His picture is modeled after *Homage à Delacroix* by Henri Fantin-Latour, who in 1864 lined up seven artists, including Manet and Whistler, and three writers, including Baudelaire, who had been Delacroix's admirers. Fantin-Latour then judiciously posed them beside a portrait of the great French Romantic painter. The composition is as simple as the relationships. Soyer, on the other hand, chose a much more difficult situation to compose. He selected ten realist artists for his *Homage*, including Edward Hopper, Jack Levine, Leonard Baskin, Reginald Marsh and himself. Also portrayed was



Paula Hondius, 1980: unsentimental realism

Soyer's twin brother Moses, a lesser-known painter who died in 1974. Most of these men had little or no connection with the long-dead artist being honored. As a result, the people in the picture are even more dissociated than they usually are in Soyer's group paintings. In this case, the artist produced what is, in effect, a collage. He painted each portrait separately, then copied his originals onto the larger canvas—a procedure that robbed the work of immediacy, to say the least. While working on the painting, Soyer seemed to anticipate failure. He wrote in his diary: "I have often a very uneasy feeling that I simply am struggling with something beyond me for which I have not enough technical knowledge. The secret of doing big group paintings has been lost."

Soyer's most successful pictures are his portraits and figure studies. Among the most impressive paintings at the Hirshhorn is his 1980 *Paula Hondius*, a portrait of old age. This painting of a shapeless body seated in an angular director's chair at the light-struck center of the canvas is a triumph of Soyer's unsentimental realism.

Quo Vadis, 1980: where Soyer is going has not been in doubt



Another commanding canvas, painted when Soyer turned 80, is the latest in a long series of portraits Soyer has done of other artists, including Arshile Gorky, Milton Avery, John Sloan and many obscure representational painters. This time Soyer's subject is Mervin Jules, now 70, who is viewed, starkly, in an empty room, as a realist icon of aging.

Nudes are a continuing preoccupation of Soyer's. His

studies have an erotic quality that is unexpected in so detached an artist. The bodies—always female—are not beautiful in the classic sense. Heavy-haunched and often pregnant, Soyer's models have inspired his freest, most impressionistic and ultimately his finest work. Among his most memorable pieces are the full-length 1952 *Nude* at the Whitney Museum, the lithographs at the Hirshhorn print show and the drawings of nudes that are scattered through his entire *oeuvre*.

There is a sameness about Soyer's work that, while admirable in its fidelity to a single vision of reality, is sometimes tedious to contemplate. Soyer's expanded use of color in the work of the past two decades has merely emphasized the grayness of his emotional palette. No one knows this better than Soyer himself. Of a retrospective exhibit of his work at the Whitney in 1967, he wrote: "Looking at all these pictures, I didn't know whether to be pleased or distressed by the sameness, the thread of continuity I found there. Though the men and women who people my canvases cover a span of 40 years or more, they have changed little. Their costumes may differ slightly, but their bearing, their gestures, the atmosphere emanating from them are hardly changed." As Soyer remarked, there is no sudden activity or drama in his pictures. "On the whole, I was struck by a sense of the static, of repose."

Soyer has inherited the cool, peaceable spirit of his forebear, Eakins, but not the master realist's abiding interest in the movement of the human body. From his hero Degas, Soyer learned an uncompromising sharpness of line but failed to appreciate his irony. "Art is vice," Degas declared. "One doesn't take it in lawful wedlock, one rapes it." Nothing could be more foreign to Soyer's gentle, contemplative nature than that hyperbolic concept; moderation and measure are, happily, among the blessings he brings us in his seventh decade of self-observation.

—By Patricia Blake



Self-portrait, circa 1920: fluid strokes