

RAPHAEL SOYER

According to an old fairy tale, during the Golden Age artists thought that they had something in common and there was considerable fraternization. Then the non-objectivists gained the upper hand and began to look down on the realists. Raphael Soyer, the leader of the realists, politely told the conceptualists that they were very intelligent, but that what they were doing was not art but something else.

Soyer tells us what art should be like in concurrent exhibitions of oils at the Forum Gallery in New York and of drawings and watercolors at the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington. The New York show features thirty-five oils executed during the last five years and selected by the artist. They are among the best he has ever done. His subjects are New York artists and the people of the West Side, full of vitality and the will to exist. Raphael and his twin brother Moses must have developed a deep understanding of New York; they were selling newspapers, working in soda fountains, and running errands there at the age of 12. At 15, they were attending free classes at Cooper Union.

Raphael Soyer has just published a book, *Diary of an Artist*, which gives valuable opinions on a large portion of western art. By telling about the paintings he likes, he is really telling us how he would like to paint. Describing a Rembrandt at the Hermitage, he mentions the old master's use of soft golden reds, browns, and ochers. Soyer's *Model in Studio*, in the present show, was painted with a similar palette having more reds than any other color. Here is the complete palette: flake white (Hopper recommended it to Soyer because it does not peel), ocher, alizarin crimson, vermilion, light red, burnt sienna, ultramarine blue, ivory black, and viridian.

There is a touch or two of red in *Model in Studio*. All other colors are subdued. Besides this use of color, there are other affinities between Rembrandt and Soyer.

Both accept life, but both also accept death. In *Study for Portraits at a Party* the idea of death is introduced in an unusual way. The Soyer brothers are separated from the guests at the party and placed at a certain distance in the background. There they look like ghosts because of their general grayness and age.

Following Rembrandt, Soyer makes you see the beauty of ordinary people and things. The entire scene in Soyer's *Model in Studio* is ordinary, including the woman, the sagging sink, and the electric heater. Any hint of elegance or of untruthful idealization would be out of place. But the homely model has a human heart that really beats.

At the National Gallery in London, Soyer was struck by the originality in composition and mood of the *Young Spartan Boys and Girls* by Degas. Examining Soyer's methods of communicating a mood by means of composition in his portrait of *David and Janet Soyer*, we find that he requires a more rigid geometric arrangement than usual to conform to the formality of a concert recital.

Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* is one of the large paintings that Soyer admired in the Louvre. This picture pleased him because of its restrained color (black, white, brown, and red against the gray of the sky). These colors added to the meaning and mood of the painting while avoiding melodrama.

Soyer has interesting ideas about the sizes of canvases. He studied Fantin-Latour's groups of artists and writers, noting that the canvases were smaller than might have been expected. "Van Gogh never painted a large picture. Cézanne, Degas, Gauguin, Renoir, even Manet and Monet, only occasionally," Soyer says. Whenever he saw a huge canvas filled with doodles, it made him remember an article by Heywood Broun, which began by describing a louse. Viewed up close, under a microscope, the louse looked as big as a battleship. Soyer concluded, "It is effective to magnify, and deceptive."

Nevertheless, he took note of the way Delacroix based his large pictures on smaller studies and sketches. Soyer

also has filled many sketchbooks. As was the case with Fantin-Latour, the final goal was to obtain a unified effect even though a number of different sketches had been used.

Soyer does not waste much time looking at the work of other artists unless they exemplify qualities that he himself needs or values. He is painterly and was quick to see that Breughel relies on line rather than brushstrokes. In Siena he had a similar reaction to Duccio's most famous Madonna. "Frankly, early Italian paintings never interested me much," he said. "They are icons really, not paintings. For me Italian art begins with Masaccio, Filippino Lippi, Botticelli, etc." He praised Georg Grosz for his draftsmanship and trained memory. "His so-

called Dada period drawings are viciously expressive."

While painting, Soyer was always assessing character. He felt that the artists who replied to his request for them to pose for his *Homage to Eakins* showed their characters by their answers. Hopper felt that some artists might pose for the pictures just for the publicity and not for love of Eakins. Baskin wanted to know who else would be in the picture. Jack Levine said that of course he would pose.

Hopper had some of the qualities that Soyer admired. He was frugal, lonely, weighty, truthful, unadorned, and unsentimental. The list was drawn up by Raphael Soyer, who seems to have many talents. (Forum, October 1-30)

Gordon Brown

Raphael Soyer, *Model in Studio*, 1977. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60".
Courtesy Forum Gallery.

