

MERKIN THE MAGICIAN

by Bruce Helander



A PORTRAIT OF HARRY CROSBY, 1994
pastel, 31" X 22"

An exciting ancillary benefit to the Master Artist Workshops at the Robert and Mary Montgomery Armory Art Center has been the opportunity to view first-hand at the Center's Colaciello Gallery selected works by several of the participating prominent artists. Richard Merkin's current show follows last season's superb exhibit of Wayne Thiebaud's work, which in both cases offer an intimate and varied survey of the artists' imagery during their respective workshops. Phillip Pearlstein follows Merkin's show with an exhibition titled *Objectivity and Observation* - both shows this year are first class and provide this community with some of the very best contemporary art being produced in America today.

THE FETISHIST, 1992-94
oil on canvas, 54" X 76"



Richard Merkin is no ordinary painter. In fact, there's nothing ordinary about this chap other than his passion for baseball, boxing and teaching. He's able to pull out of his monogrammed bowler hat a magical palette, a bag of visual tricks that capture the imagination of his increasingly expanded audience with wit and circumstance. Merkin's work offers numerous clues to the man himself: handsome, eccentric, colorful, multi-layered, improvised, narrative, witty and refined to the nines. His paintings and pastels document fascinating people and unexpected places that remind us of movie stills or situations we have heard about but have never seen: "Satchel Paige in Miami", "Degas Emerging from a Pissot" or "The Sins of New York". There are pictures loaded with innuendo and inside jokes, and there are others that are simple, straightforward and elegant, as in "A Portrait of Harry Crosby", but they've got gusto and wonderful titles to match. I recall a New York Times review of many years ago that observed that Merkin's titles were an art form unto themselves. It still holds true. Whether it's Morandi, Mondrian, Mingus or Mungo, McDermott and McGough or Morton (as in Jelly Roll), his subjects are portrayed with passion and accuracy, with an idiosyncratic delicate line that builds the foundation for all his layered compositions.

Merkin is a storyteller both on canvas and in person. I suspect he's the most informed modernist of our day with an amazing photographic memory portrayed in broad, colorful strokes and obscure, albeit intimate, historical details. There are only a few living artists that can match his wit but none that possess the absolute total recall of every pertinent detail.

His current show at the Armory, affectionately titled "Brooklyn in the Fifties" or "The Geometrist," and other pictures, provides the viewer with a selection of images that reflect the man and his mission: beautiful pictures that have a singularity of style

and accompanying unforgettable urban narrative. He's a master at combining a complex tossed salad of cubist sensibilities, abstraction and realism, Dada wit, social surrealist commentary mixed with domestic under-the-counter vinegar and imported linseed oil.

The stars of this show may well be his unique pastels which are the subject of his workshop "Rediscovering Pastel-Improvisation and Invention." One excellent example, "These Foolish Things," depicts a mysterious theatrical woman next to a bouquet of flowers, a lamp pole and a dashing silhouette of a man with tray in hand. The copy recreates the picture with a lovely poem: "The smile of Garbo/and the scent of roses/the waiter whistling/as the last bar closes."

His articles for Vanity Fair are full of the same gusto and wit and are an extension of his pictures in the written word. His weekly pastel illustrations for The New Yorker are now as recognizable as the publication's logo of a top-hatted monocle-man observing a butterfly. He is a truly unique American character, and like his best friend, Tom Wolfe, he continues to explore the roller coaster of American lifestyles and personalities with magical grace, engaging enthusiasm and visual intelligence. ♦

SACHEL PAIGE IN MIAMI, 1996
pastel, 40" X 30"

