

# On Exhibit

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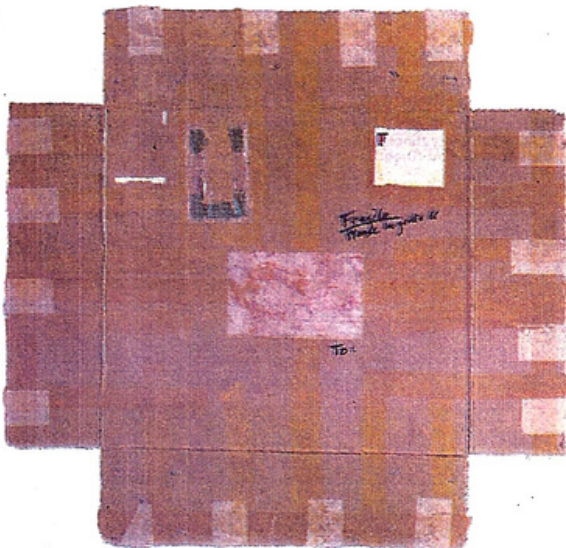
CENTURY GALLERY

Mikel Glass's "At Rest" from his "(One Man) Group Show" at Century Gallery.

## Exhibition

Full engagement with contemporary art-world issues isn't easy while still respecting the past, but figurative painters Mikel Glass and Erik Sandberg, each of whom has one foot firmly planted in the 16th century and one in the 21st, certainly give it a try. "Mikel Glass: (One Man) Group Show" runs through Wednesday at Century Gallery, while "Erik Sandberg: Painting" remains up through Dec. 23 at Conner Contemporary Art. Call Century Gallery at 703-684-6967 or Conner Contemporary Art at 202-588-8750. See review on Page 56.

— Michael O'Sullivan



CENTURY GALLERY

"Addressee Unknown," a painting by Mikel Glass, looks amazingly like a real box. Glass's work is on exhibit at the Century Gallery.

## Different Strokes

By MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN  
Washington Post Staff Writer

REPRESENTATIONAL painters Mikel Glass and Erik Sandberg share at least one thing in common: virtuosic technique. In a pair of area exhibitions—"Mikel Glass: (One Man) Group Show" at Alexandria's Century Gallery and "Erik Sandberg: Painting" at Dupont Circle's Conner Contemporary Art—both artists' work is jaw-droppingly well executed. Where they diverge from each other is in this: Whereas Sandberg wants you to look past his skill to the pictures he creates, Glass takes every opportunity to rub your face in the fact that what you are looking at is, after all, nothing but oil on canvas.

Well, not *nothing* exactly. Glass is also interested in subject matter. But his subject, as often as not, is painting (or, more precisely, paint). What's the first or second thing you see after entering the Century Gallery? A sculpture featuring a paint can, suspended upside down just inside the front door, that appears to be disgorging its contents, in this case a vomituous eruption of pigment seemingly frozen in mid-splash, all over the gallery floor. Behind the front desk hang two more works, ornate frames barely containing an overflow of lavalike ooze. It's a horror-movie vision of art come to hideously life, yet it's not clear if these visions are meant to be taken as his nightmares—or ours.

Glass, of course, is a consummate technician. He's so good, in fact, that he's not even afraid to be bad upon occasion, and a couple of the paintings in his show are so cold and so soulless as to give you the willies. Otherwise, his works are so full of life they seem to breathe, whether he's painting a homeless man in an alley, a woman napping on a bed with two dogs or a doll laid out like a corpse in a coffin. One *trompe l'oeil* piece in particular, depicting a flattened cardboard box of the sort you might find in any painter's studio, or in the back office of his dealer, seems more real than the real thing. It's no wonder the show is called "(One Man) Group Show," since it seems, at times, to be the product of seven different artists.

Glass's art is about much more than grandstanding, however. He doesn't just want us to admire, but to think about, what he's doing. To that end, he includes—along with his portraits, still lifes and fantasias, as well as a 3-D diorama of an artist's studio—a painting done in the style of children's book illustrator H.A. Rey's "Curious George" series. Set in a gallery, the picture features Glass himself, in the guise of Rey's Man in the Yellow Hat, looking at art while his chimpanzee companion stares back at him. "While the man in the yellow hat pondered the abstract sculpture," the caption reads, "George wondered what his friend was looking at."

Clearly, as Glass no doubt un-

derstands all too well, what any of us are looking at, whenever we look at art, is the artist himself.

Sandberg understands this, too. As he says in the catalogue essay accompanying his show at Conner, with regard to the sometimes male, sometimes female (and often naked) figures engaged in Hieronymus Boschian debauchery in his surreal, highly detailed work, "They're all me." Unlike Glass, however, Sandberg isn't so interested in reminding us that we're looking at a painting. As essayist Jamie L. Smith puts it, what the artist subscribes to more than anything is "the Renaissance dictum that true art hides itself."

In other words, writes Smith, it's "human flesh rather than paint" that Sandberg would shape. As for what those shapes spell out, that's not always so clear.

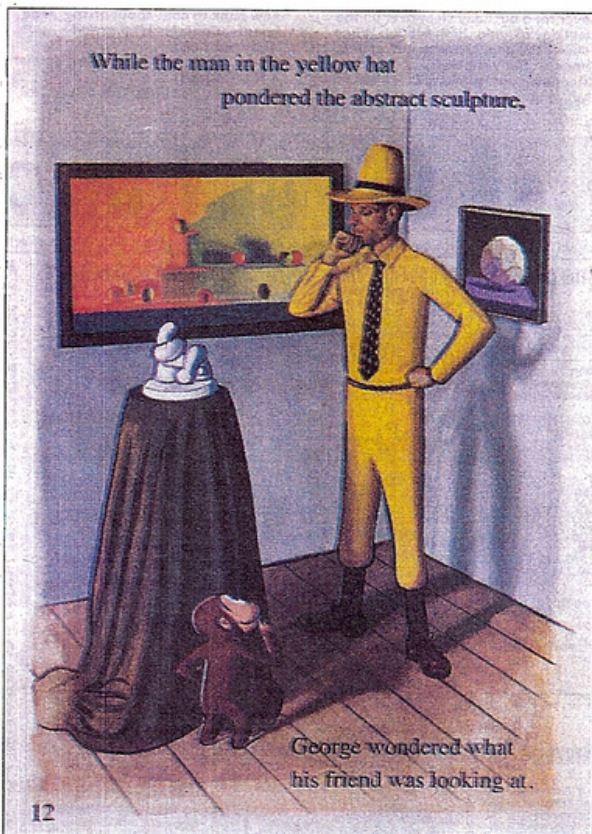
Sandberg's work beggars description. Here, a man slices meat off his own thigh, and eats it. There, a woman, wearing only panties and tall socks, is held down over the back of a chair by three corpulent cherubs, as a skeleton, curled up in the fetal position, hovers nearby. Blending allusions to sex and death, science and superstition, the sacred and the profane, Sandberg's work is slippery stuff. One image seems to allude to abortion, or maybe liposuction. Another to tainted meat (mad cow disease?). It's commentary of a dyspeptic sort, yet who or what it's upset about isn't clear.

And if it were any more easily deciphered, it would be less powerful.

Sandberg may argue all he wants that the figures in his miniature dramas are all him, but that's partly disingenuous. Like his abstract expressionist brethren, what he's really doing by creating these hermetic little worlds is not opening a window into his own psyche but holding a mirror up to ours.

**MIKEL GLASS: (ONE MAN) GROUP SHOW** — Through Wednesday at Century Gallery, 919 King St., Alexandria (Metro: King Street). 703-684-6967. [www.centurygallery.com](http://www.centurygallery.com). Open Tuesday-Friday 11 to 7; Saturdays 10 to 7; Sundays noon to 5.

"Man in Yellow Hat," by Mikel Glass, at left, is styled after "Curious George."



While the man in the yellow hat pondered the abstract sculpture,

George wondered what his friend was looking at.

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