

Review of the Arts

Imaginary Gardens With Real Toads

ART

Philip Behymer is an artist whose paintings are, to borrow Marianne Moore's phrase, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." This blend of artifice and reality gives his paintings scraped and discolored, this stone is quite ordinary. Taken from

And power is the right word to use. Behymer's show at the University's Museum of Art is a stunner.

Directly on the right in the room in which Behymer's work is exhibited, a stone is floating in a perfect blue sky—an artist's sky. The intense blue at the top gradually softens and pales as the eye descends. But the stone is not an artist's stone, not the polished, smooth, archetypal stone of Brancusi or Arp. Pocked, scraped and discolored, this stone is quite ordinary. Taken from its own context and placed in a painting, however, it commands attention—it dominates the painterly space that surrounds it.

In another canvas a fish floats just under a rusty gear. A woman furtively touched the fish and backed away.

"I had to be sure the surface wasn't filmy," she confided; "the damned thing looks so real."

Like the Surrealists, Behymer elevates the ordinary to art, and releases the eloquence of common objects by placing them in non-logical but emotionally perceived relations.

Unlike the Surrealists, many of whom chose objects in a random, "automatic" manner, Behymer selects his objects very carefully. Fish, birds, wheels and stones are among the most ancient shapes and human symbols.

According to Jung, whom Behymer claims as an influence, stones are frequent images of the Self because they are complete and unchanging. Stones also symbolize the deepest and simplest experience. Jung would say that Behymer's other objects have similar histories, are also rooted in some part of our most ancient memory.

But Behymer insists that his objects are not just symbols, that they also exist as separate and uniquely individual things.

"An object must first be real before it can be an archetype, before it can express something universal and eternal," he said.

So for Behymer the surface of things is extremely important—the innumerable, minute differences that distinguish members of the same group. Finally these objects that are first just themselves and then archetypes become what Behymer calls "cosmic self-portraits," enabling us to see, in Blake's phrase, "eternity in a grain of sand."

And Behymer manipulates these objects for many different effects. In one small, humorous painting, a daisy hangs over a horse's turd. Bitten by insects and past its prime, the daisy has begun to wilt, but the horse's turd is near to perfect.

Behymer suggested that another painting makes what he called "almost too cynical a statement." Its lush blue background space opens at the bottom into a small, arching rainbow, a promise. Just above it is an egg shell, a part of a beginning. But dominating the beautiful, serene space is a bird that hangs mid-air. He is a seedy old bird whose bruised and damaged body is tautly stretched across the canvas, with extended wings and claws reaching down. His head slopes gently over.

"He is crucified," explained Behymer. Many will undoubtedly disagree with Behymer's evaluation of the painting's statement. After all, as Crazy Jane said to the Bishop, "Fair and foul are near of kin, And fair needs foul."

Most of those who see the exhibit will without question agree with Richard Paulin, director of the Museum, who rated Behymer an "excellent artist, both technically and aesthetically."

"Behymer is a painterly painter whose work is a unique combination of magic realism and surrealism," Paulin continued. "The incongruity of his symbols may bother but it doesn't fight you. His paintings work, they are believable."

At their best, Behymer's paintings re-invest common objects with magic and wonder. We can turn ourselves inside out, and see the world with fresh eyes. In another context Werner Haftmann spoke of this expanded vision.

"From a dried-up mud puddle, from a clod of earth in our path, the aged face of the earth peers out at us, and in a fragment of stone we read the sorrowful tale of our cooling planet."

The Behymer show opened last Sunday and will close the 24th of this month. 36-year-old Behymer received his Master's degree from the University of Oregon in 1971. He has exhibited his work in one-man shows through the Northwest. He is now living with his wife and four children in Vancouver, Washington.

-Regina O'Neil

The Discreet Charm of Luis Bunuel

FILM

Luis Bunuel's snide religious spoof "The Milky Way" (1968) was shown here last week by the University Film Society and it seemed like the clumsy work of a master half asleep, especially in contrast with Bunuel's newest and sleekest satire, "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie." Half allegory and half dream fantasy, "The Milky Way" has the mark of Bunuel's magic—the eerie and disorienting quality of an endless nightmare. Two pilgrims attempt to travel to Santiago, a reputed holy place, and their trip involves one odd encounter after another as they cross boundaries of time and place in the trance-like illogic of dreams. "The Milky Way" is an ambitious film, aiming its wit broadly at church and society, but it is hardly a success next to Bunuel's better efforts, largely due to its esoteric humor and its narrow, bitter theme.

Few things, of course, can be more powerful than that unique combination of mockery and message which characterizes many great films. No question about intention: the great movie maker wants to teach us about ourselves; but the method in successful satire forces us to recognize a reflection of the audience on the screen and it is this recognition which frequently makes the film both comic and memorable.

Luis Bunuel has been a master at just this, poking fun at his worldly audience while he tirelessly drives home his message. And the perversity of his humor coupled with the deadliness of his message probably lies behind the popularity of his movies among those well versed in black humor. For the unprepared, Bunuel can seem brutal, and strangely, vaguely disturbing, but sophisticated fans concede that when he is successful, when his method works, the effect can be devastating and entirely admirable.

It has not been my experience to enjoy Bunuel's films in the past and the earnest, heavy-handed nature of "Viridiana" and the boring, anti-ecclesiastical jokes in "The Milky Way" seemed to spoil some of the humor and originality of the film. "Charm" is imbued with all the Bunuelisms that have become superb: fast-paced, surprising, ironic, a showpiece.

A bright, color movie made in French, "The Discreet HCharm" is imbued with all the Bunuelisms that have become familiar to his regulars: anti-clericalism, anti-middle-class, anti-kitsch and anti-church. But added to the aura of perversity and rebellion we have come to expect is a new element of

slapstick and abandon which sends the proper kind of audience into semi-hysterical laughter.

Five middle-class characters, perfectly played and perfectly cast lead us through their suffocating daily rituals and a series of awful nightmares, disturbingly familiar in form and cleverly placed to completely confuse the careful detail of Bunuel's middle-class realities and the surreal settings of dreams. In one sequence our heroes are guests at a formal dinner. (They are constantly preparing to dine.) The host fails to show, but no matter, discretion and etiquette are the specialty here, and this includes looking away as the prim but near-sighted butler slides two plump, over-cooked chickens onto the rug, dusts them off, and returns them to the table. The atmosphere builds, things appear more and more illogical and frightening, until the guests suddenly notice that they are on stage, the curtain is pulling back, an eager, opening-night audience applauds, and "my god, what am I doing here?" one of them pants, his eyes wide and his forehead perspiring, "I don't know my lines!"

The timelessness of dreams and the dreariness of bourgeois life are effectively inter-laced. Useful too is Bunuel's sickening, darkly comic violence, which is almost too sinister to properly appreciate during the first half of the movie. Once it has proved to be a slapstick, a harmless kind of violence, like the weird self-immolation in "Harold and Maude," it becomes Punch 'n Judy funny, and with some minor exceptions, a successful device. "He may look dead," we think calmly, "but we're onto this film and this is just a dream." Or a nightmare, depending on your identification with the part.

While the characters in "The Milky Way" get to be predictably banal in their malicious, animal ways, the bourgeois in "The Discreet Charm" never cease to be coy and satirical. Perhaps credit goes directly to the actors. Or perhaps Bunuel himself has turned bitterness into charm and his present attacks on society have moments of subtlety which previous movies had neither sense nor self-mockery to expend. Either way, "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie" is a glossy product designed for the witty and well-educated—who will find it a bit easier to get the message from so familiar a theme, so far away a setting.

-Debby Baldwin