

## Mike Howard's Paintings

Early in the conversation at Mike Howard's studio one is informed that Howard is from an Alabama cotton mill town and that he left there to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps. Howard was drawn to New York City by the lure of art. He shares with many American artists, as distinguished from Europeans, an experience of art as a way out from a barren cultural existence.

Howard attended the Whitney Studio program and lifted weights for a year so he could put his body in his first exhibition. He mentions seeing the rich painted Cadmium Red of an early Donald Judd sculpture. He later became Judd's assistant, but didn't become a minimalist sculptor. He became a painter.

As he worked through the 1970's and 1980's showing regularly, meeting fellow artists, getting married, having children, (he's now a grandfather) the Judd influence seeped into his painterly, imagistic paintings, or rather, perhaps, formed them.

The connections are twofold; the first part is in the carryover of Judd's concern with the primacy of the physical in order to transport the viewer beyond it. This is seen in Howard's intense appreciation of paint: through all of the work, one is confronted with the factuality of art materials used in such a way that their natural inclinations seem exposed: the paint is hasty but sure, dripping, splotching, being dabbled and stroked, but does not overly address our attention to the maker of the marks. Secondly is the influence of the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey, a philosopher of such great importance to Judd that he chose him for his deathbed reading material. Dewey thought that everyone was potentially an artist, that it was a social act and improved the world. In this respect, we can observe Howard's open painting style in conjunction with imagery from the popular press, legends in and out of the art world: his unguarded, egalitarian inventory of subject matter.

For example, Howard chose to do a series of small paintings of the one-room shack where the Unabomber lived. These works evoke a curious stylistic affinity to commemorative plates and other vernacular decorations and also forms an image association to Lincoln's cabin. The unorthodox message of this series, it seems, is that all Americans, however damaged and distorted by life or their own motives, are to be included in the great pageant of American history. This is completely in step with the precepts of Dewey.

Another example is his depiction of the Kennedy assassination. Newspaper and television images of this event have been seared into our brain, but Howard's rendition seems to return it to the people, a place where it has never been and where it has always belonged. The painting is an astonishing demonstration of how the manipulation of paint can, in the hands of a sensitive artist, perform an act of pure empathy. One might sum up Howard's practice as that of someone chiefly involved with un-alienating the viewer.

So many news stories from the recent past are experiences that most people assume they already have had. But if one confronts with Howard's painting of JFK Jr.'s airplane plummeting downward from the open sky, to give a final example, one realizes that this was not an event that is the property of the commercial media, but is owned by all of us. John Dewey saw art as a means to the just and fair ends of a democratic state. This is the ideal that Mike Howard participates in with his generous and spirited work.

- Joe Fyfe