

# In The Galleries

## You'd better watch out for John Fudge

By GORDON MCCONNELL

Deep within the Joseph Magnin store at 721 16th Street in Denver, where a stockroom might be expected, is a tiny art gallery. While looking for the gallery it's easy to become lost among the racks of slick clothes or be distracted by luggage of myriad specialized shapes and spectral tie displays; but the exhibition space is, at last, clearly discernable. It is small, well-appointed and set off from the rest of the store like a bright cube, unclouded by commerce. Indeed, business seems to be not so good for this lonely gallery — the only commercial gallery in Denver now showing the works of advanced local artists. If the gallery fails, as seems possible, it will be no less a shame because others have failed before it.

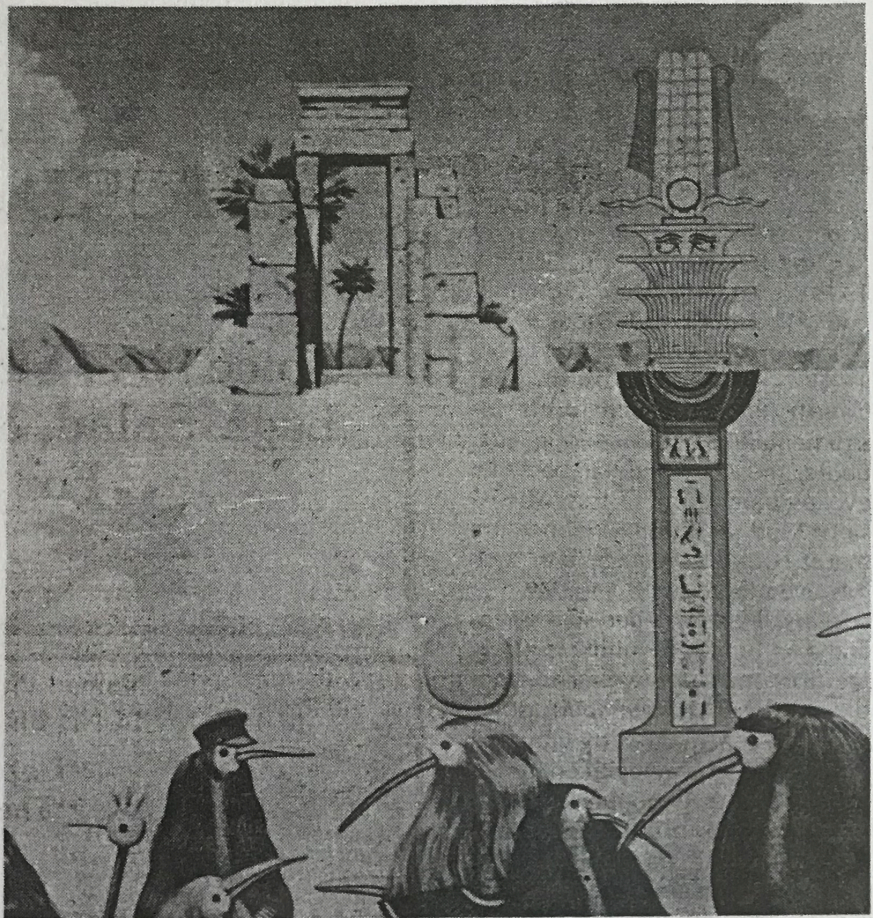
Currently the JM Gallery has 10 moderate-sized canvases by John Fudge, a well-known Denver artist and teacher. His fantasy paintings are often mildly offensive and sometimes barely adequate technically, but they may also be very funny and profound. Playing as he does with fantasy and humor, he is likely to be self-indulgent or tasteless; and, although the paintings have been obviously well-considered in many ways, some critical self-consciousness seems to have been omitted from the process. Too many of the basic ideas are too trivial to merit the almost meticulous treatment Fudge gives them, yet out of many come some few truly unforgettable images.

Among these is the *You'd Better Watch Out* in which a red-suited and white-bearded Santa Claus has assumed the serious, single-minded aspect of a machine gunner

in a bomber. The juxtaposition is brilliant; one thinks first, of course, of the Christmas song from which the title was culled — a warning to children not unlike the old joke about the Second Coming ("I have good news and bad news . . ."). It also recalls the silly cartoons fliers often painted incongruously on their planes during World War

his main purpose is to entertain, but this does much more than that — it even approaches, somewhat, the transcendent precision of someone he admires: Rene Magritte.

A second version of *You'd Better Watch Out* is less successful; but it is perversely gratifying to see Santa, grimacing like a riled-up Gabby



Cathy Jean and the Roommates

Two, and the fact that Santa also is a flier. To judge from his uniform, one might even surmise that the old man is a commie. Ultimately, this is an untranslatable image which works in perfect concord with its title, which is adequately painted and composed and which seems to be the right form for the idea. Form and idea here are actually one thing. Fudge has said that

Hayes, ripping laundry from a clothesline and grinding it under foot as he menaces a startled suburban housewife. Although the details of this scene have been chosen with selectivity, some technical awkwardness is distracting. The economy and imaginative forcefulness of the first version eclipse this one. Indeed, the gunner-

continued on page 23