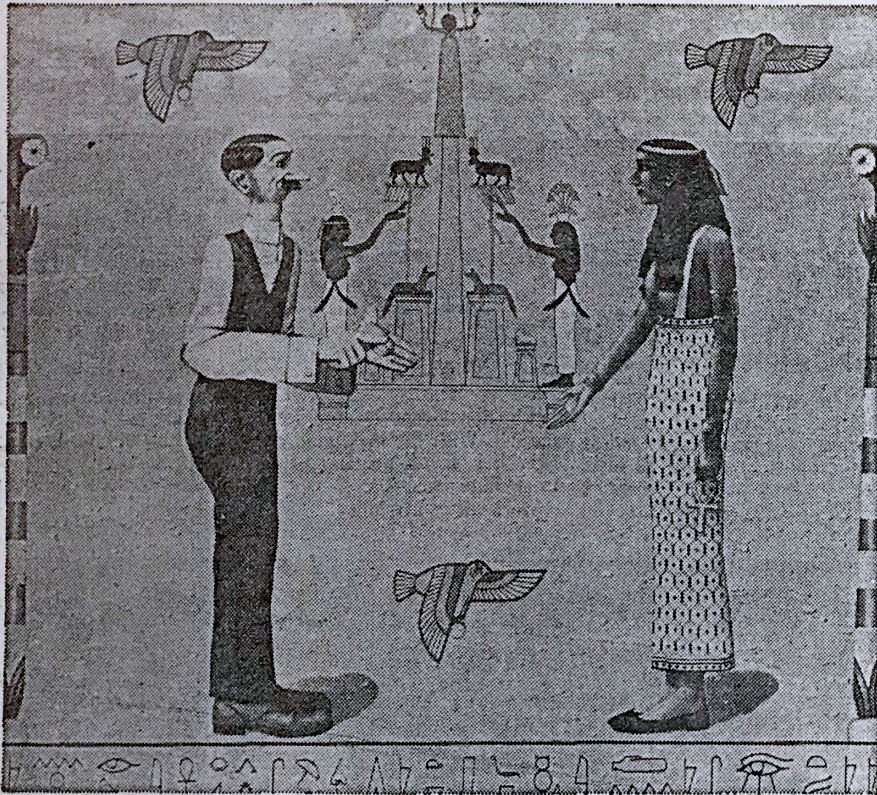


Arts Now

John Fudge: airplanes, Dracula, imaginative art



John Fudge painting titled "Mutt In Ancient Egypt" brings forth camp humor and original hieroglyphics.

By **DUNCAN POLLOCK**
News Art Critic

THERE ARE ESSENTIAL differences between John Fudge and the rest of us, mainly because Fudge knows more about model airplanes and Count Dracula; and just happens to be one of the most imaginative artists around.

He's also quite mad for science fiction, daytime television, dirty magazines, monster movies, Egyptian mythology, paleontology, World War II memorabilia and just about anything else he can find to fuel an insatiable appetite for the bizarre.

Bizarre, in fact, is the word most commonly used to deal with an artist who has remained something of a maverick ever since he emerg-

ed from the University of Colorado art school in the mid-1960s.

Although Fudge's paintings seem linked to the shaky traditions of regional funk, especially the monster machinations of Chicago and the whimsical side of James Nutt, his true ancestors are the Surrealists who liberated art from its rational moorings in Europe during the 1920s.

Like the Surrealists, Fudge projects an uncommon or eccentric view of the world by freely mixing dream and fantasy with shrewd, often comic observations of the world around him — one that is populated by straight guys, con artists, pop heroes, and an assortment of dumb creatures who rotely perform the rites of civilization.

IN HIS ONE-MAN show which opens Tuesday at the Wilmaro Gallery, Fudge continues to cut an even wider swath through the realm of the imagination.

There are 11 paintings in the current exhibit: six are new, five have been shown elsewhere.

The "oldie" group includes such favorites as "Who Wrote the Book of Love," a topsy-turvy painting that mimics the rock'n roll-surfer cult of the 1950s, and a picture inspired by the old girlie magazines called "Bright Eye," depicting a one-eyed maiden demurely sipping tea in the buff in the midst of a landscape drawn from Rousseau or the annals of science fiction.

Though all of Fudge's pictures contain a heavy dose of goulish fantasy and make-believe, many of his earlier works offered some sort of commentary on the state of popular culture, both past and present. One painting touched on current health food fads. Another serenaded the cinematic legend of Bonnie and Clyde, while still another poked fun at the backyard absurdities of suburban life.

Fudge still hasn't put enough distance between fantasy and reality, but he's beginning to show a greater interest in myth and symbol as divorced from a specific point of reference.

FOUR OR FIVE of the paintings in the Wilmaro show deal with pseudo Egyptian subject matter, one of Fudge's current interests. All the themes have factual sources in mythology, but as always Fudge takes plenty of artistic license to jumble his cast of characters or to introduce bizarre pictorial elements and such stock items as the pyramids from the Paramount Motion Picture symbol.

In "Ancient Egypt," for instance, he transforms a bird-headed god into a female to suggest a homosexual relationship between the goddess and Cleopatra. Fudge's jealous pharaoh, meanwhile, sports a five o'clock shadow in the manner of Al Capone.

Another painting is titled "Night School in

"Ancient Egypt," and perhaps reflects some of Fudge's own memories of nocturnal education. Here, the cat goddess, Bast, is transformed Cinderella-style into a dowdy school marm dressed in high heel shoes, a hand bag, stop watch and school bell. Her only companion in the stark, eerie landscape is a life-size rat.

A THIRD PAINTING in the same series pits Mr. Frederick of Hollywood lingerie fame against Little Egypt, a nubile maiden sporting nothing but go-go pasties and a G-string. Mr. Frederick has a lecherous leer on his silhouetted face and he's dripping with sweat in the red hot Egyptian sun. But a palm tree sways in the distance, the sky is placid blue and Little Egypt looks cool as a cucumber.

No matter how eccentric the imagery may be, Fudge always presents his subject matter in a straightforward, realistic manner. He doesn't view the world through the sharp-focus, photographic lens that has become fashionable during the past few years, but builds his pictorial images in a crude, rough-hewn way more akin to the figurative style of Edward Hopper.

FUDGE'S CAMP HUMOR is often obscure. His discordant dislocations and choice of subject matter seem eccentric indeed, but then again, the world he sees from his backyard is every bit as bizarre. The nightly newsreel of wholesale death in Vietnam is interrupted by a toothpaste commercial. Millions flock to see a pair of gun-toting gangsters get riddled with machinegun bullets. The state of the union address is followed by "Creature Features."

Everything is surreal in this world, Fudge seems to say, so why not bring Mutt and Jeff to the land of the pharaohs, and let Mr. Frederick meet Little Egypt.

The Fudge show will travel to New York after completing its run at Wilmaro April 19. Gallery hours are 11-4, Tuesday through Saturday.