

art katharine chafee

Two explorations of the real

Eugene Goosen organized an exhibiton for the Museum of Modern Art in 1968 called "The Art of the Real." It was an attempt to illustrate an attitude in art which, he perceived, had developed in the U.S. during the years 1948-1968. He identified this attitude as the "real" an art, "which makes no direct appeal to the emotions . . . seems to have no desire to justify itself, but instead offers itself . . . in the form of the simple, irreducible, irrefutable object." It was distinct from "realism" and from inclinations towards representation, illusion-making, and natural forms.

Goosen's premise was attacked by many, including some of the artists he selected for the exhibition. It's always risky business to try and fit artists into styles or movements. Yet his basic inclination was sound and now, almost ten years later, it often appears as an undercurrent of work of contemporary artists. In many different forms, it remains a preoccupation of many today: For example, John Fudge whose work is on display at the Joseph Magnin gallery.

Fudge is an idiosyncratic painter who includes on his canvases quirky and often obscure references to '50s pop culture, rock-and-roll legends, science fiction and World War II. Juxtaposing the possible and the fantastic, Fudge has produced paintings with nightmarish reverberations and a bit of Dr. Strangelove black humor for good measure.

Almost-real-looking people do very odd things in his fantasy world of too-real mediocrity. The titles are the literal equivalents of a world where pop songs and food are both syndicated, packaged and predictable: "Blame it on the Bossanova," "Come Dine with the Colonel," "I Think We're Alone Now." Iconographical studies of these paintings would thrill any shrink with years of material. At times, Fudge's humor is grating and the absurdity of the existence that he imagines is deadening. Yet his sense of the real is pervasive, and it is frequently right on target.