

Stark Reality

An artist bares the soul of beauty and ugliness.

By Hilton Kramer

The Forum Gallery in New York has enjoyed a long and distinguished history as a venue for highly accomplished realist painting, and this season it has added to its laurels by introducing to the American public an extraordinary talent: Chilean painter Guillermo Muñoz Vera. At 49, Muñoz Vera, who now lives and works in Madrid, is clearly one of the premier realist painters on the international art scene today. For a number of reasons, his work is bound to cause a sensation wherever it is seen.

Not only is Muñoz Vera's technical command of his medium truly remarkable, but so, too, are the scope and audacity of his subjects. These range from flawlessly executed landscapes, cityscapes and storefront window displays to protest marches and some scary scenes of sexual intimidation. Sex and politics and what can also be called sexual politics (women held as political hostages, for example) are important subjects for this artist, who doesn't hesitate to deal with them in graphic detail. There are images of the female anatomy in this exhibition that I never expected to see in a mainstream art gallery, and it is a sign of the times, I suppose, that they can now be exhibited without fear of censorship or a visit from the local police. Need I add that voyeurism is also one of the subjects to which Muñoz Vera has applied his realist skills?

Viewers are thus advised that Muñoz Vera's paintings may not be



appropriate for anyone likely to be disturbed by X-rated subjects. It is not in the interest of prudery, however, that I hasten to point out that the single most impressive painting in the exhibition. It is called, simply, "11-M," 2004, and it has nothing to do with sex but does have to do with politics. It depicts a panoramic outdoor scene, viewed from above, of a funeral gathering in the rain. What we see depicted are none of the figures in the crowd but only the tops of the open umbrellas they are carrying—about 70 umbrellas in all. Most of them are black, but a few are brightly colored, and the crowded image of these umbrellas has an effect not unlike that of a huge abstract painting in which the entire area of the picture surface is filled with a myriad of virtually identical forms. This is one of the most extraordinary feats of pictorial realism to be seen here in many years.

Equally flawless in its handling of light, color and descriptive detail is a darkening sky hovering over a cityscape of illuminated high-rise buildings in "Sunset in Miami II," 2004. Then, too, there are the two storefront window display paintings ("Window with Apples"

"11-M," 2004, oil and white alkyd on canvas on panel, 39 1/3" x 48".

and "Window with Brown Pears," both 2004) in which dozens of apples and pears are depicted with a concentration on color, shape and texture that is more often reserved for the painting of elegant still-life compositions.

Yet our response to such virtuosic realism is bound to be made somewhat mixed, if not in fact deeply apprehensive, by Muñoz Vera's obsessive interest in scenes of sexual menace and political violence. In the painting called "Gender Violence," 2004, we see a half-naked woman sprawled face-down on the floor, her legs tied together with rope. In "Hostage," 2004, we confront a naked woman, her face wrapped in a black chiffon scarf, standing in front of a wall pock-marked with bullet holes. As for the painting titled "Cyber-Masturbator," 2005, I won't even attempt a description.

These are not, to say the least, subjects that invite a disinterested aesthetic response. In the Latin American world where Muñoz Vera's vision originates,



they are subjects designed to provoke political action, but in a posh Manhattan art gallery the meaning of these paintings is likely to be a lot less incendiary. They are more of a sensation than a call to action.

Still, if our primary interest is painting, not politics, it also has to be said that Muñoz Vera doesn't disappoint us. "A Forum Gallery Introduction: Guillermo Muñoz Vera," which was shown at the Forum Gallery from April 28 to June 10, is an exhibition that we will not soon forget. ♦

Hilton Kramer, Art & Antiques' long-established art critic, is the editor of The New Criterion and the recipient of the 2004 National Humanities Medal.

"Window with Apples," 2004, oil on canvas on panel, 41 1/3" x 48".