

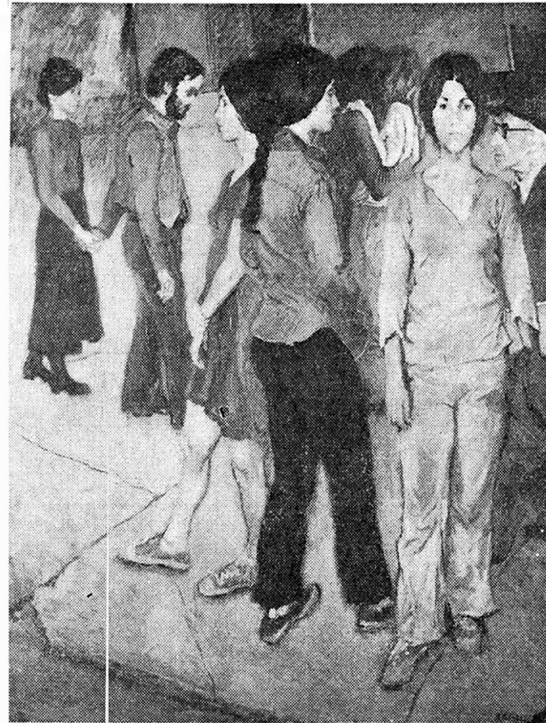
Art: Summing Up Raphael Soyer

By HILTON KRAMER

AT THE AGE OF 77, the American painter Raphael Soyer can look back on a long career, and this season his accomplishments are being honored with two exhibitions of his paintings and drawings and the publication of his "Diary of an Artist" (New Republic Books, \$15.95). In New York, the Forum Gallery (1018 Madison Avenue at 79th Street) is showing a large group of Mr. Soyer's recent portraits and city street scenes (through Oct. 30), and in Washington the National Collection of Fine Arts has mounted a retrospective survey of Soyer drawings and watercolors, which includes work from around 1917 to the present day (through Nov. 27).

A good way to approach Mr. Soyer's work is through the newly published "Diary," which deals with the years since 1961 and includes some lively accounts of other artists—especially of the older American painters of Mr. Soyer's own generation—and notes on his visits to museums abroad. From the plain-spoken pages of this book one derives two emphatic impressions about the man that have much to tell us about the quality of his art. The first is that he is the gentlest of gentle souls, who invariably takes the sweetest and most optimistic view of things. The second is that he is a man crazy about painting and never happier than when he is in direct contact with it, either in the museum or in his own studio.

Turning from the "Diary" to the paintings at the Forum Gallery—I have not yet seen the show in Washington—we find ourselves in the presence of yet another kind of diary in pictorial form. There are many portraits of other artists in this show—Paul Resika, Warren Brandt, Herman Rose, Joseph Floch, Sol Wilson, Chaim Gross, among others—and a large painting called "Portraits at a Party," which is itself a kind of celebration of contemporary realism. As is frequently the case in Mr. Soyer's work, this painting also includes a self-portrait.



Raphael Soyer's "Street Scene with Self-Portrait" at the Forum Gallery
One carries away the feeling that a family reunion has been attended

One of the problems of the written "Diary" is a certain evenness, not to say monotony, in the tone of voice that is maintained throughout—a tone of such sweet reasonableness that anger or intensity or any part of heightened emotion has no place in it. The love of painting is effectively communicated, but it is a placid, domestic, family kind of love that never disrupts anything, least of all the emotions.

This, I am afraid, is also one of the problems—for this viewer, anyway—with Mr. Soyer's paintings. Those gray, even tonalities offer no respite from a world so gentle that it acquires some of the characteristics of a private fantasy—as if the entire observable universe were one happy family.

This pervasive gentleness and softness of feeling and the pervasive gray tonality that is its principal pictorial vehicle inevitably raise questions about the "reality" of Mr. Soyer's realism. We expect portraits of friends to be flattering, and Mr. Soyer's usually are. More often than not, he projects his own sweetness onto his subjects. Where it becomes really bothersome, however, is in the New York scenes. We may just be able to accept the young women who are depicted in "Street Scene with Self-Portrait," because the work is so obviously a fantasy about youth

and age. But when Mr. Soyer confers on a number of Eight Avenue prostitutes this same sweet sentimentalism, he leaves the realm of realism altogether. He is just not tough-minded enough to do the subject justice.

Fundamentally, he is a painter of domestic felicity, and he includes painting and painters in his family circle. Thus the feeling one carries away from the Forum Gallery show is of having attended a family reunion. In such gatherings, no one is under oath to speak harsh truths; only the good things are remembered and both youth and old age are forgiven everything. It might not be realism, but it leaves us in no doubt that Mr. Soyer has been lucky in both his life and work.