

# Portrait of the realist at 77

By JERRY TALLMER

It is a big week in the life of 77-year-old Raphael Soyer, who dismisses the whole thing with a shrug.

"These exhibitions," he said, "I have had enough of them." Soyer laid a finger against his cheek. "I try not to think about it," he said.

Today there opens at the Forum Gallery, Madison Avenue and 78th Street, a show of 35 oils he's done in just these past four years. "Street Scenes and Portraits," he calls it. Two days ago at the National Collection of Fine Arts, a branch of the Smithsonian in Washington, there opened what he calls "a kind of a retrospective" of 75 of his drawings and watercolors from the 1920s until now.

"I make thousands of drawings," said Soyer, meaning in his more than 50 years as an artist, "and it seems to me somehow inadequate to have 75 drawings" as a summing-up. "But that's okay," he said.

## Words, too

Then there's his "Diary of an Artist," a book of the memories, travels, conversations, and strong opinions of this little bird of a man who all his life has believed in recognizable images and has painted that way. The diary is being brought out in a handsome illustrated edition by New Republic Books to coincide with the exhibits in New York and Washington.

Now, in his West 70s studio, Soyer hauled out and propped up a batch of his latest canvases—the ones going into the New York show. Some were taller than he was. "I'll stand on tiptoes," he said with a smile for the photographer.

There was one painting of a young unmarried couple, friends of his, seated on a daybed, staring straight forward. "I think I try to get their character and their habits, you know," said Soyer. "The way they sit and the way they act. Together yet disconnected."

He brought forth the painting of an older couple. "See how I did her hands with the veins? And not too young," said Soyer. Then a painting called "Eighth Avenue," of three prostitutes in boots. "But the models were really

young actresses." Then a nude. "Strong, eh? A fortifying quality." A painting of two men, masculine and vigorous. "It's impressive, huh?" Yes, it's impressive. "U m m h m m m," said Raphael Soyer.

Finally a street scene full of young people, and a tiny figure on the right who is Soyer himself.

"I paint myself in these pictures as if I were a witness," he said. "I like everything about human beings. They're the most interesting animals."

A stupid question, Mr. Soyer. The work keeps getting brighter. Are you painting quicker? Slower?

"The same. Always the same. I don't know how long it takes. As for the work, it changes of course, but it changes organically. I have never gone with the prevailing fashion. But it did change. More flamboyant. Maybe you get more flamboyant with age. Painters get more colorful

in old age — Degas, Chagall."

Degas. One of the great heroes of Soyer's diaries.

"My passion. Yes, all right, an anti-Semite. You know, he was against himself, anti-himself. A very tortured, strange man. I mention in the book: he was an aristocrat, he could have been the greatest society painter, and yet he painted the most truthful pictures of workers."

## No stereotypes

You yourself have always been politically on the left. "Progressive, yes."

But have never drawn or painted that way.

"No, I could never understand when they were doing a magnificent heroic worker, or a capitalist with a big belly. I always painted what I saw. People homeless, worthless. But I could never be dogmatic."

One thought crossed another.

"Abstract Expressionism,

for instance, I think became a dogma. I am a contemporary of the Abstract Expressionists, you know. I knew them all. I could easily have been an Abstract Expressionist. I remember when it was so praised, so advertised, and representation completely ignored. I went against the temporary zeitgeist, you know."

Well, a philosophical question: is there room for everything in art, or not?

"I guess there is," said Soyer, "but for me this minimal art, or Op art, or no art... just doesn't interest me."

In your book you don't even think much of Picasso's "Guernica."

"Yes, I'm not so wild for 'Guernica.' It's certainly more famous than murals by Raphael or Ghirlandajo, yet I prefer them a thousand times to 'Guernica.'"

"See," said Soyer, "I can think of Caravaggio and Courbet, or Titian and

Delacroix, 300 years apart, and there isn't any great difference. Yes, a difference, but not a great difference.

"Now, in 60 years such a change. Conceptualists! A girl who belches, she's a

philosopher now. Adrienne Piper, she posed for me, a very charming girl. She

tapes belches and releases them in the library, and that's considered Conceptualism and gets write-ups in The Village Voice. Now she's going to Dusseldorf to do her thesis on Kant.

"Artists. I ask them: 'What do you call yourself artist for? Can't you call yourself a poet?'"

Raphael Soyer's "Street Scenes and Portraits," at Forum Gallery, 1018 Madison Av. (78th St.), through Sept. 30. "Diary of an Artist," by Raphael Soyer, 316 pp. with 40 illustrations, New Republic Books, \$15.95.

