

The Vision of Raphael Soyer

BY JOANNE OSTROW

The vision of Raphael Soyer came to the Hirshhorn this week, in the form of two exhibitions of the 82-year-old American realist's works.

"Soyer Since 1960," 17 large-scale canvases, and "Raphael Soyer: 65 Years of Printmaking," 144 etchings, drypoints and lithographs, together form a major review of the artist's works — the first museum showing of his newer paintings since a 1967 retrospective at the Whitney. A catalogue with the print show includes the artist's observations about nearly every work.

His subjects include family members, models and other artists; his results are very New York. Beginning with etchings of his parents dated 1917, the prints progress to an Eighth Avenue hooker in 1980 and "Man and Woman" caught in a kiss in 1981. They are unsentimental but emotional renderings of everyday life.

"The Mission," a lithograph, presents a homeless man Soyer befriended and used as a model: He is the haggard fellow sipping from a cup with bread in his hand. The light is carefully arranged with subtle gray tones softening the men's faces. Soyer recalls that the man, Walter Broe, "was a very loyal model, we were great friends. He didn't have a home so I let him sleep in my studio and he kept it in order. He died in my studio.



Detail from "Self-Portrait" (1933 by Raphael Soyer.

Mr. Broe was very reliable except when he'd get drunk once in a while, and then he would raise Cain."

These are chronicles, from Soyer's fellow members in the John Reed Club in 1932 to the "flower children" he met on the lower East Side in the Sixties. The person and the particular add depth to each scene: A young man drags a woman by the hand along a crowded street; a nervous brunette in a T-shirt is captured in "Girl Biting Her Nails." His "Portraits at a Party," a large oil with brilliant purples and reds, captures artists and friends, with Soyer in a corner talking to his brothers Moses and Isaac, a sketch pad sticking out of his pocket.

In his self-portraits, Soyer appears wide-eyed, tiny and aware at each age, gazing directly at the viewer. His 1920 self-image, with an open collar, thick dark hair, beard stubble and cigarette dangling from his mouth, is especially penetrating. He made the lithograph by looking in the mirror: "In those days everybody smoked," he told an interviewer. "It was the fashion for an artist to draw or to paint with a cigarette in his mouth." The young man appears wise, if a shade world-weary.

Nowadays, (as documented in a 1980 oil as well as several cameo appearances in other canvases on view), his cheeks are more drawn, lips more pursed and there's no cigarette. But the eyes are the same, behind the glasses.

RAPHAEL SOYER — "65 Years of Printmaking" and "Soyer Since 1960," at the Hirshhorn through October 2. Independence Avenue and Eighth Street SW. Daily, 10 to 5:30.