

A gentle, penetrating view of humanity

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If we had any sense, we would declare Raphael Soyer a National Treasure and accord him the same respect the Japanese and Koreans give their most esteemed and accomplished artists and craftsmen.

He has more than earned that honor. Not only because his career spans a goodly portion of this century, but also because he has remained true throughout to his original

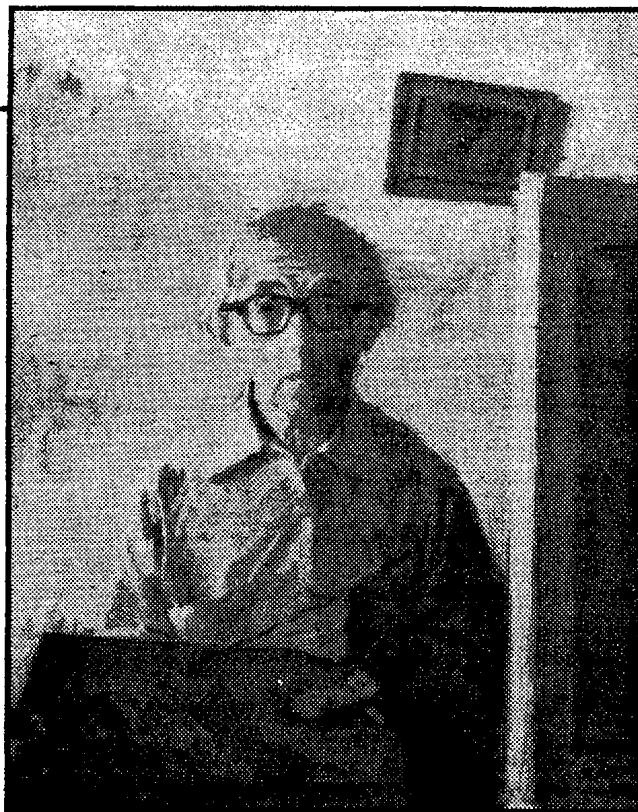
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vision that man is at the center of art — and that to create significantly demands not only skills and sensibilities, but a profound sympathy for the pains, joys, fears, and triumphs of human existence.

This notion of art as transmuting human experience into paint was also shared by Soyer's heroes Rembrandt and Degas. But where they succeeded early and magnificently, Soyer found his way more slowly and less dramatically. The humanity was always there, the art occasionally was not.

All that is behind him now — witness his most recent paintings on view at the Forum Gallery here. In these simple, straightforward, sensitively painted studies of individual humanity, Soyer has established himself once and for all as among the truest American painters of this century.

He has also established himself as one of the most subtle colorists at work today — no doubt to the surprise of those who have paid him little attention since the early



Soyer's 1980 'Self-portrait': grounded in life

1960s. In painting after painting, it is the subtle shift from a sky-blue to a greenish-blue, the smudge of a white causing a delicate pink to "sing," or the heaviness of a blackish purple against a silvery gray that gives the work its final touch, its final glow of both life and art.

All traces of the emotional heavy-handedness of his earlier work, often taking the form of vaguely melodramatic images of the poor, the alienated, or the dispossessed, have disappeared. In their place we find gentle but penetrating portraits (often of painter friends), studies of models in his studio, and figure compositions such as "Quo Vadis" which deal more with general philosophical

questions rather than with specific social issues.

There will be some — most especially those whose tastes in representational art have been conditioned by the cool photo-realist paintings of the past decade — who will decry Soyer's portraits and figure studies as sentimental. They will see them as lacking the creative toughness that is so much the rage today.

Nothing could be further from the truth — unless by "toughness" we mean only a cold and ruthless detachment from the deeper and more generous emotions of life (or a kind of creativity that lauds always "going against the grain" even if truth or reality might be distorted thereby). The fact is that Soyer's art is so totally grounded in life and in reality — it denies or evades none of it — that to accuse him of softness or sentimentality is to miss the very nature of human courage.

Soyer's strength comes from looking life straight in the eye — not from denying it. If, as a result, his art differs somewhat from the more "up to date" realist art around him, well then I would suggest we stop assuming that he is the one who is "off," just because he is currently in the minority, and start to reassess the art that stands (or seems to stand) at a tangent from his.

Yet I don't believe Soyer can in any real sense be described as a great artist — any more than can his contemporaries Hopper, Hartley, Burchfield, Marin, or Dove. Yet each of them had a touch of greatness, had the ability so to shape a deeply personal insight into the nature of life that we can join them in that vision through their art — and find our lives enhanced by the experience.

I heartily recommend this exhibition to everyone, from the young art student trying to learn how to paint the human face and form to the professional interested in subtle effects. But most especially to those who think both feeling and the representation of the human form have no further place in art. All of them, I'm certain, will find something of value in this show.

It will remain on view at the Forum Gallery through Nov. 21.