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Out of the semi-underground, the art of Paul Lamantia

By DENNIS ADRIAN

THE healthy state of the current painting scene in Chicago is a circumstance in which this city can rightly take some pride. There is an active, dedicated group of collectors responding to significant work as it surfaces in gallery or museum exhibitions; most of the major artists are beginning to receive more regular attention from major museums in this country (especially New York) and abroad; and the museums here, including the Art Institute, have accepted the vitality of the contemporary Chicago art world as a verified phenomenon.

The comfort of this situation has even bred a certain amount of complacency. One tends to assume that most of the good work is available through the regular channels, and what isn't, perhaps doesn't deserve to be.

We even have come to pride ourselves on relishing the tough, gamy quality of much Chicago art, and one overhears in art-world conversations an almost blasé level of response to its demanding and refractory works.

IN THE LIGHT OF all this, it is really a relief to note that, out there in the semi-underground, there still exists painting that challenges and wrenches the current broad limits of acceptability and "taste."

As an example, take the work of a still young Chicago painter, Paul Lamantia.

Lamantia's work actually has been around for quite a while. He has shown on and off in the Chicago and Vicinity exhibitions at the Art Institute since 1964, from time to time he has shown small groups of paintings and drawings in different galleries and university shows, and while he (along with Art Green) was unaccountably omitted from last spring's big Chicago Imagist show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, there were two



Daily News Photo/Henry Herr Gill

Paul Lamantia

large paintings of his to be seen at that time across the street from the museum at the Deson-Zaks gallery, 226 E. Ontario.

Part of the reason for Lamantia's existence more or less beyond the pale is that his production is extremely limited. He considers himself lucky to complete six large paintings a year, and the work in his North Side studio must be fitted in with the artist's typically overloaded schedule of obligations to a wife and children and holding down a full-time teaching job.

THE MEAT of the issue, however, is the work itself.

Lamantia is a monumental figure painter, and his paintings are incredibly demanding. They are ugly and disturbing, with strong overtones of eroticism and violence. In his pictures, huge distended women, strapped in constricting underwear and metallic stockings, are crammed into garish interiors that recall the hysterical rooms of Francis Bacon,

rooms in which murders seem to have just been committed.

Even though the imagistic schema of Lamantia's pictures falls within the major traditional category of "women in an interior," the voluptuousness and repose usually associated with this kind of idea are transmuted into something harsh and hysterical, something profoundly shocking (though his images

are never obscene and his work always has a remarkable level of formal structural integrity).

The different elements that Lamantia juggles and develops so peculiarly in his work are his rasping color, considerable use of textural differentiation in his surfaces, strong contours, and a bewildering variety of patterns and designs, which often seem to interrupt or contradict the larger shapes beneath them.

These factors are all brought into play in the figurative images, preponderantly of women, which undergo dizzying transformations into giant insects, plant-like forms and horrific organic conglomerations.

His drawings are, if anything, more frenzied and bizarre than the large paintings, which by comparison have a kind of stately amplitude.

The pastels have a ferocity and intricacy that forces the consciousness up to a terrifying pitch of violence and agitation, brought about largely by the extremely complex working of unstable images.

IN FACT, Lamantia's art presents us with something very rare and extraordinary. While completely "unesthetic" in the sense of a vision of refinement and subtlety, it is amazingly powerful and direct, and forcefully projects a completely idiosyncratic esthetic of its own.

His work demonstrates that the currents of artistic activity in the city are still capable of generating new forms and modalities which outdistance even our currently extremely accommodating levels of taste and esthetic acceptability.

If there is one such instance, there are probably more, in the works of other artists yet developing or unnoticed for whatever reason. And it means that we will have to face up to the difficult problem of reformulating our critical standards, so that we may try to come to terms with the scope of such a powerful and compelling painterly vision.