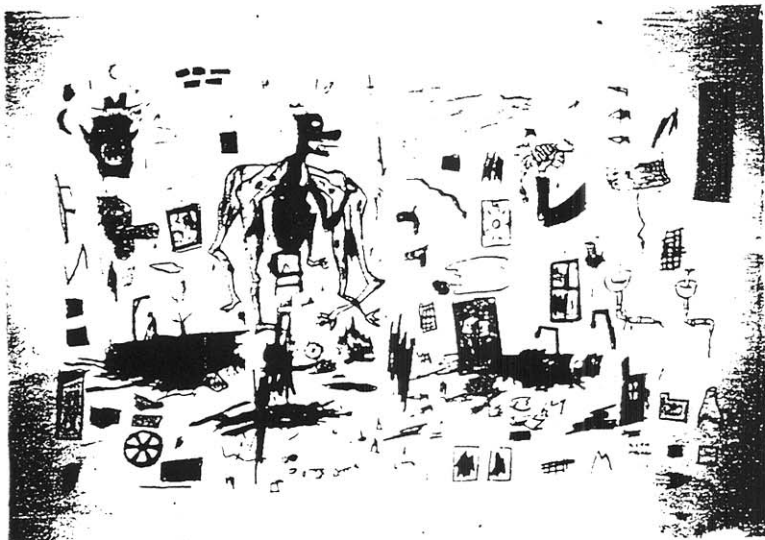


THE ONE. THE ONLY. THE ORIGINAL.

DOWNTOWN

Politics, Poetry, Philosophy, Art, Theater, Film, Media, Music And Hidden Agendas

ISSUE NO. 238 APRIL 3-10, 1991



Untitled pastel drawing by Rick Prol (30"x20" approximate). (COURTESY: TILLYN SHARP GALLERY)

Art From The Jaws Of Hell: Rick Prol

by Tom Wachunas

Journal from another war front: the Lower East Side. On Avenue C at around East Fourth Street I notice a little banner fluttering in the wind from a lamp post that says something like "Avenue C, The Place To Be In The '90s." Gimme a break. Local community board hard at work? I don't know and I didn't ask. The visual evidence says it all. This is urban hell. Shells of burned out buildings surrounded by heaps of rancid garbage that have obviously accumulated for many months, indeed years. Waste both human and otherwise. Politicians and other civil miscreants meet here to bemoan devastation without raising an effective voice for real change.

This area was once the seedbed for the furious art activity of the '80s—the "East Village Scene." Most of the scruffy storefront galleries are gone, but as evidenced by two stimulating exhibitions that I visited recently, artists are recycling what they see into visions born from the rubble that surrounds them. Call it, maybe, Neo-Realism.

Meanwhile, at 8 Spring St., gallery proprietor Willoughby Sharp seems clearly pleased with what he characterizes as his "niche" on the border between a flagging Soho market and the once explosive East Side. Sharp recently mounted an exhibition of new pastels by Rick Prol, who hadn't had a solo outing since 1987. Prol was one of a handful of high profile neo-expressionists of the '80s.

There is also a free associative quality to these quasi narrative-like pieces. Prol's new body of work was executed in an inspired frenzy over a mere two months, and the results are a clear departure from the relatively cramped quarters of his past work. Like Basquiat, he has populated his surfaces with recurring icons. But unlike his former contemporary, Prol's renderings are less precious about line and scuffed-up surfaces. His backgrounds are undisturbed expanses of white, his forms more deliberate, and outlined in black. The colors vibrate with the opulence of jewels. These pieces look like big pages from a fiendish coloring book.

Prol has developed a fascinating visual language based on recurring images of death, decay and general chaos—an alphabet of codified pictures of violence: dismembered hands, broken plumbing, gored animals, severed heads with knives through their throats, dangling phone receivers, burning buildings. While the titles give you a loose sense of theme—as in "Things To Come," showing a tank, a battlefield and a leaking oil drum—no image in any one piece takes precedence over another. Visually, there is no one focal point. The image of a burning tenement has the same importance as a radiator, or a barking dog. Image and ground operate with equal tension in a democratic, open space.