

Rick Prol's Absurdist Allegory

During the rollicking 1980s, Rick Prol pretty much established himself as the avatar of East Village expressionism. Populated by raggedy beatniks beset by assorted ghetto calamities, Prol's paintings are painfully absurdist. How tragicomic is it, when your anti-hero is drawn and quartered while sitting fully dressed on the toilet?



Now, these pictures seem characteristic of the entire East Village scene, a carefree bohemia that stood by dazed and confused as celebrity was first thrust upon it and then brutally snatched away only three years later.

In Prol's paintings, animals stand in for human beings. A horse lies dreaming in a bed in a bare tenement room – "I think it's my father, who just died," Prol said – as if the very real pain can be made into a harmless nursery dream. Here, the animal represents a helpless emotional core, a child's powerlessness.

In other canvases, the artist's Lower East Side tenement is stacked high with the carcasses of wrecked cars. The studio as junkyard, sure, but the image suggests the demolition derby that is the male ego, or rather its aftermath, when all that was fine-tuned and muscular is but a comically picturesque husk.

Expressionism usually signals a search for emotional truth. The gaudy carnival of Prol's canvases takes place under a veil of sadness, where the artist proclaims his fascination with the ridiculous pathology of contemporary life.

Walter Robinson, New York, August 2003