

# Arts

& Books

The Charlotte Observer

SUNDAY  
JANUARY 30, 2000



## Paintings find depth in cultural shallows

**D**on't be alarmed by New Yorker Adam Straus' paintings, on display through March 3 at Davidson's Van Every Gallery. You won't be wrong to think his acid green, pink and orange-colored images belong on a clothesline at the corner of Woodlawn Road and South Boulevard, next to Elvis on velvet. You won't be wrong to think you saw a similar work hanging over a pool hall's bar.

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VISUAL ARTS

And you won't be wrong to think someone's playing you for a fool by drawing you into a respectable gallery to ponder over such no-brainer themes as the insignificance of humans in the solar system or the awesomeness of sparks flying from the campfire into the night sky. You might even entertain the thought that your own barns and clowns might someday hang on these very walls.

Believe me, all these sights and ideas are painful for the average art critic to contemplate. But you'd be wrong if you didn't get beyond a surface reading to absorb the profound sensations these strange works elicit.

On the surface, their shallowness is unsettling. The colors, subjects, medium and brushwork

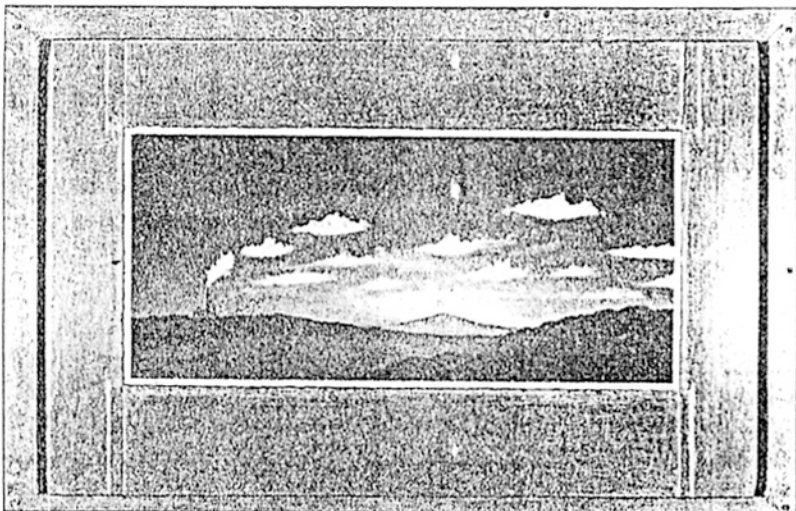
seem amateurish, mundane, trite, unintelligent, inarticulate, unattractive, classless and gimmicky rather than poetic. But something unnatural is happening in these scenes of nature.

Take the special effects. From about 30 feet away, walk toward "The Dark Side of The Once Great Planet," in which a single orb is suspended in blackness, and see if you don't feel like you're in the cockpit of the Enterprise. If you were a 10-year-old boy, you might think this a cool trick, but the more sophisticated viewer will wonder what serious issues lie behind the obvious.

Issues such as thinking of technology and the self-serving conveniences it brings as so much fun and games, when in fact it also brings social disconnection, existential emptiness and environmental Armageddon. Straus includes a manmade element in each of his 'scapes, like the American flag on the moon, to illustrate his belief that, in the interest of progress, paradise has been lost. Straus' paintings are schematic

representations of a life that was once authentically sensuous, arduous, complicated – and worthwhile – but which is fast disappearing.

Most impressive is his ability to convey spatial vastness without the usual techniques of atmospheric and perspective. How he accomplishes this is a mystery; the only discernible devices are minute details situated within huge flat areas that cause the eye to move front-to-back, and a light-absorbing matte finish. Salvador Dali's "Last Supper" at MOMA and Charles Basham's "Between Torrent and Avalon," which used to hang in Spirit Square's lobby, possess a panoramic vastness in which space telescopes laterally from the center. But in Straus' "Descent" (the view from a plane approaching a city at night), "Drag" (a cloud-gray winter landscape spotted with blood) and especially "McStop" (a pitch-black desert with a golden arches night light), he creates a sense of infinity that pulls you in like a magnet.



"Cloud Maker" by Adam Straus. Works by him and John Montelith are at Davidson's Van Every Gallery.