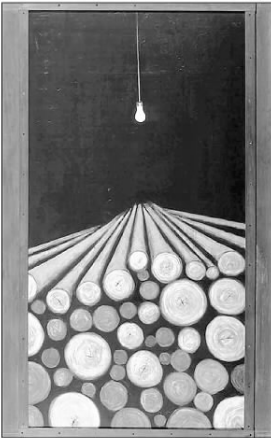


ART REVIEW

Artist attacks pollution and waste in paintings



Adam Straus' 'Timber' oil on canvas on wood encased in lead.

Straus' work on display at Butler Institute; it's a mixed bag of styles

By Dorothy Shinn
Beacon Journal art and criticism critic

Five seconds into Adam Straus' *In the Shadow of Paradise* (1994), you get it: These are paintings about the destruction of nature through pollution.

It doesn't take a genius to see that Straus is against pollution—not only the human, chemical and industrial kinds, but the accidental ones as well.

The show, on view through July 17 at the Butler Institute of American Art, Trumbull Branch, confronts the viewer with hard-to-miss attacks on pollution and unrestrained consumption of just about everything, including the last wildernesses.

(Take, for instance, *Detroit*, 1994). Straus's oil-and-rust-steel-dings-on-lead-pendant-painting (one image above another) with the relief-stamped name of "Detroit" in the lower register, nearly all of it covered in rust, while in the upper register is a landscape with many small smokestacks, black and spewing smoke and flames into a dirty and dark gray vista.



Oakland Post cartoonist Eddie Charles Johnston, wife Charolotte and daughter Asele visited Akron relatives in June.

Cartoon

Family to join Akron cartoonist in California

Continued from Page E1

backgrounds at a time when the civil rights movement was at its peak.

"Each cartoonist has his own message to give," Turner said. "I tried to tell the message of people getting along together."

Before moving to California, Johnston worked different jobs in Akron, including as an X-ray technician at Akron Children's Hospital.

One winter day, 23 years ago, he saw a young man drawing face of Popeye in the snow. It was Adkinson. "He took me under his wings and showed me a lot of things about art," Johnston said.

After Adkinson moved out to California to pursue a master's

degree in marketing and advertising, Johnston visited his friend and decided California was where he would start his cartooning career.

Adkinson, who works at the Post part-time, helps Johnston with the direction of *Foodtoons*, and believes that comic strips can help people relate to the troubled children go through.

"I want people to understand that nowadays, children are unfortunate going through adult problems," Adkinson said.

This month, Johnston plans to move his family to California.

Working with a veteran cartoonist was a great way to jumpstart his career, he said.

"It was an honor for me to work with a living legend," Johnston said. "It's like Usher doing something with Michael Jackson. It's something that I'll never forget, that I'll share with my children."

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Toxic Run-Off: Waterlilies, an oil on canvas by Adam Straus. The Butler Institute of American Art, Trumbull Branch, is displaying his work.

because clearly the artist is on a mission of environmental cleanup, a message that's not only unambiguously, but occasionally a bit ham-handedly presented—not always with irony, as seems to have been intended.

Unless, of course, it's considered ironic (it certainly shouldn't be considered subtle) to use *The Scream* as the title of a small painting of a little guy screaming. There are some things that one simply should not do—yet, and Edward Munch's title for his popular image is one of them.

Now that that's out of the way, let's consider Straus' work on its merits, not its politics.

Are we talking about the despoliation of Paradise in these works or of being kicked out of it? Are we looking at the ruin of the sublime or the realization that the sublime was always finite? Are we looking at loss of innocence or discovering a feigned innocence that was never lost?

When we look at Straus' painting technique, we begin to notice that he vacillates between consummate skillfulness and sophomoric primitivism.

To be a true primitive, naive to the ways of art professionals, means never having had serious art lessons, never being taught how to paint or sculpt or make prints or ceramics.

Since the art market in outsider, primitive, naive and Third World art has become so lucrative, we should not be surprised to see trained, highly capable artists trying to backdoor their way into primitivism. Some artists get tricky, like the one who switched from painting with her right hand to her left, because her "right hand was too knowing."

It seems to me that one can't be a primitive painter as well as a skilled professional artist, knowledgeable about not only media and materials but historical approaches and techniques. That's like being sort of a virgin.

Nevertheless, Straus has called himself a self-taught painter because he studied black-and-white photography rather than painting in art school.

To make his point, on the one hand he channels the French primitive Henri Rousseau, then on the other

Details

Show: Adam Straus: *In the Shadow of Paradise*

When: Through July 17, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday.

Closed Mondays, Tuesdays and holidays. Admission is free.

Where: The Trumbull Branch, 9350 East Market St., Hovland.

Information: 330-600-9900 or www.butlerart.com/trumbull

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Adam Straus' 'The Scream' reminds us of Edvard Munch's image.

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Jahja Ling
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NO RAIN DATE. The University of Akron is in Akron, Ohio and the location of the concert is subject to change.