Brian Curtis: in pursuit of quality in 'concentrated life'

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Most people in this area have seen Brian Curtis' paintings of such favorite Ann Arbor locales as Kempf House, Borders Book Store and the Blue Front, but only as reproductions on the covers of The Ann Arbor Observer.

His actual paintings, as unique originals, remain relatively unknown here.

Perhaps Curtis has remained somewhat of an underground artist because his work raises certain political issues in art that surround realism as a contemporary style.

For Curtis, realism in art is not equivalent to "real life."

"Art has to be a little bit different from real life; it's a rarefied form of life — a concentrated life," he says. Further, he puts himself quite self-consciously in the position of pursuing excellence: "I believe in a hierarchy of values, and that art pursues quality."

He feels that the late photographer, Diane Arbus, stated his stance on realism particularly well when she said, "I do feel I have some slight corner on something about the quality of things. I mean it's very subtle and a little embarassing to me but I really believe there are things which nobody would see unless I photograph them."

Curtis feels that he's exploring this subtle edge, where aspects and essences of the real world would remain unseen without the full-blown efforts of realist artists. His work is founded on an intensity of seeing developed through his own art practice and through his long-time study and teaching of art history, most recently at Hillsdale College.

Speaking of artists ranging from the Stone Age to the contemporary, Curtis says, "I have learned to see my environment through them."

And among "them," he includes designers and people in the so-called practical arts. In short, Curtis feels his paintings are both a way of defining himself in terms of this historical continuum and an attempt to find out something about himself and his experience. For these reasons, he says, "I would probably do this work even if I didn't show it."

His work for the Observer raises the specter of "illustration" vs. fine art, that invisible line that is actually more often like a moat or a gulf. It has something to do with the line between seeing and the visionary.

Curtis says he has sometimes felt, when showing his work in contemporary group shows, that "people who are really serious about their work regard themselves as creative" and regard him as an "illustrator," despite the recent groundswell of realist art, the pluralism of art styles.

"I always feel that I have to kind of scoot in with my credentials rather than on the basis of my work," he says. "It's like, 'okay, you go sell at the poster galleries or the nature galleries where people don't have any taste — they'll like your work.' But that's not the audience I want particularly. I don't want to exclude them but I don't want to pursue them."

Curtis' work first caught my eye — riveted my attention — two years ago, when I saw one of his paintings that boldly depicted an interior space, a room empty of people. It was like Nermeer's work, in that the subject was really light. . .just light: light as it filtered through the space, sliding along walls, disappearing into corners, cutting diagonal swaths here and there while traversing a window frame or a bed, sifting softly into shadows.

The painting was about things clearly seen, about things well-formed in light and by light, and yet also about reaching a point of reversal, where light disperses into darkness in a subtle gradation.

To take this simple subject and bring it to such a level of conceptual and visual moment requires an enormous sophistication of art means. One is skill in just plain handling paint. Another is a thoroughgoing knowledge of the principles of design that come to bear in so crucial a decision as choosing a vantage point, which is just one of myriad similar decisions that subtly affect the painting's outcome.

Yet as arresting as this painting is, it's not flawless. When I visited Curtis' studio recently, I saw it again and noticed a sort of color acidity, and also what Curtis considers to be an irremedial problem: A corner of the room reverses in an inside/outside illusion.

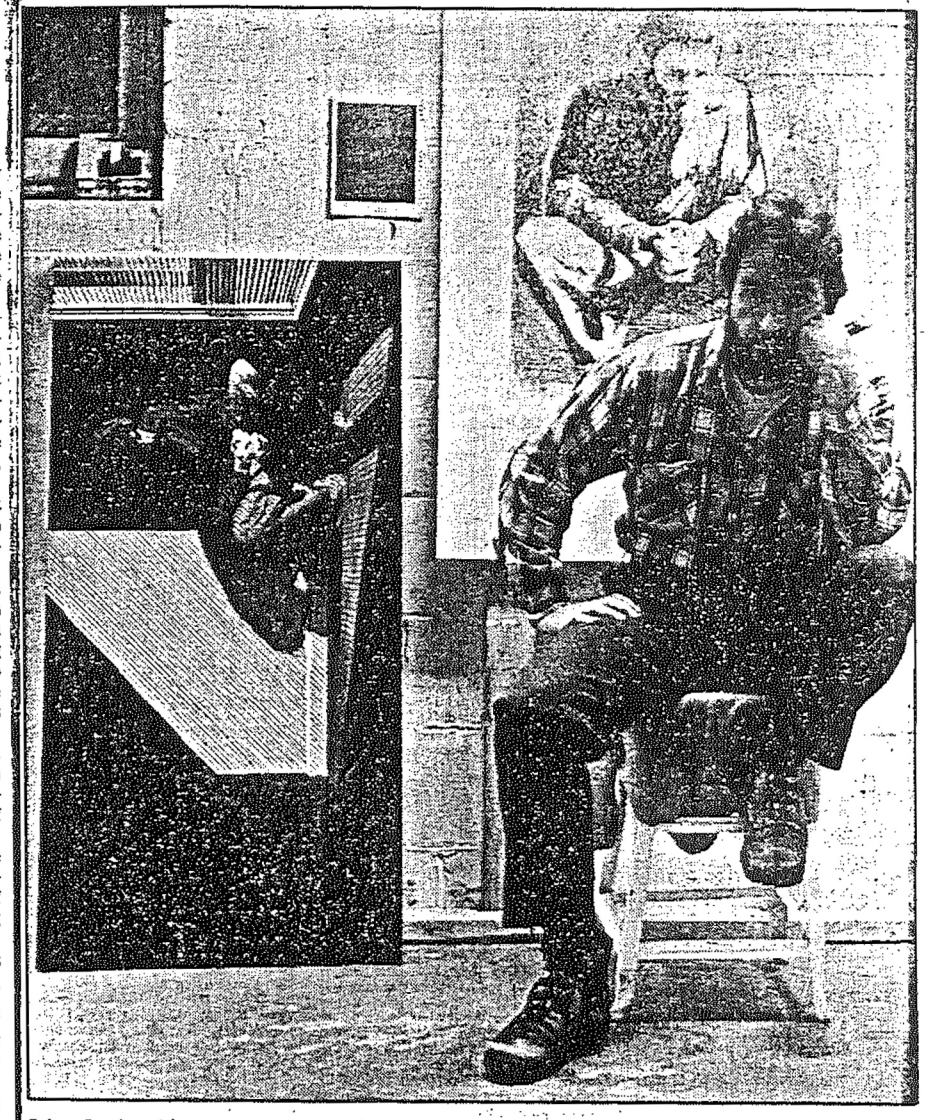
"The ambiguity of that corner devastates me," he says. But why should that be more than a minor annoyance? After all, you can look up into the corner of any room and imagine that you are outside looking down on it.

Curtis' subject matter extends beyond empty rooms and Ann Arborana to include portraits, figure studies, architecture, trucks and street scenes. In February, he'll be well above ground at the Detroit Institute of Art, where he will exhibit his work in a new series of one-person invitationals at the Sales and Rental Gallery.

Born in Brooklyn, Curtis studied sociology and art in New England and has a master's degree in fine arts from the University of Houston.

He says he's been searching since graduate school for the element that people find in mimetic images that "triggers an excitement of recognition, an interactional experience."

Beyond that, he's "trying to develop images of a personal mythology that are as exciting as ancient mythologies...a mythology hidden in our senses."



Brian Curtis, with Brian Curtis and Brian Curtis