

An Antic Hymn to a Never-Elegant New York

By MICHAEL BRENSON

As George McNeil gets older, his work gets younger. The new paintings by this nearly 81-year-old artist step out of his disco series, but they are even more topsy-turvy, even more antic. They are a hymn to New York City, composed by someone for whom Manhattan has the packed, labyrinthine concentration of medieval Celtic manuscripts.

In Mr. McNeil's world, everything is experienced in terms of the human body, and it is a body going in different directions at once. Skyscrapers may be upright, but they may also be horizontal, pointed at people like guns. The two eyes in a head are never the same. Legs rarely seem to belong to the same body. Faces are moon-shaped and homely, like the faces of Jean Dubuffet, but there is an affection for all of them as real people.

In this insistently democratic work, it is sometimes hard to tell age, race or gender. The heroes of these paintings are never elegant, never upper class, but rather neighborhood people who dance and fret and can't stop moving. With arms and legs flying in different directions, the dude on Fourth Street with goofy cap and glasses looks like a minstrel or moonist god. The size of the heads and their placement near the center of the paintings identifies street people with the medieval treatment of saints.

This is a welcome show for the Knoedler Gallery, where most exhibitions have a methodical, corporate sameness and production rather than inspiration seems to be the order of the day. Mr. McNeil had to paint these paintings. They are installed in a way that allows their joy and panic to jump off the walls.

Each of the nine paintings is named after a different place in the city. In "Broadway," buildings are flipped like cards and figures and streets seem to be belted out like a song. "Lincoln Center" features a raggedy singer flinging about her hands and feet. In "Astor Place," the color is subdued and the focus is a huge four-fingered hand that exposes its stigmatization and appeals for help.

Part of what gives these paintings their power is the blend of cool and warm, and bitter and sweet color. In addition, the way paint is applied fits the content — suggesting scratching, tying, mopping, writing and other aspects of daily life. And the surfaces are so dense that the paintings are almost like narrative tapestries or mosaics.

The most serious question is whether Mr. McNeil succeeds in his attempt to give the humble, nitty-gritty side of New York a heroic di-

nension. Along with his strong artistic identification with street life is a strong ambivalence about "high" culture. These paintings are filled with telling cultural references, but they are also informed by distrust of the kind of cultural imagination that could bring their narratives fully to life. Even if the weight of the form is greater than the weight of the content, however, these are exciting paintings.

The paintings of George McNeil remain at the Knoedler Gallery, 19 East 71st Street, through Feb. 2.



Lee Cohen

"Broadway," 1987, acrylic on canvas, by George McNeil, at the Knoedler Gallery.