

ARCHIVES | 1993

Art in Review

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN APRIL 2, 1993

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems. Please send reports of such problems to archive_feedback@nytimes.com.

George McNeil New York Studio School 8 West Eighth Street Greenwich Village
Through May 2

To say that George McNeil's art is spectacularly gaudy is genuinely to praise it, although the aggressiveness that he has long cultivated no doubt partly accounts for his limited public reputation. A steady figure on the New York scene for more than half a century, and a beloved teacher for more than three decades at the Pratt Institute and the New York Studio School, the 85-year-old Mr. McNeil has justifiably earned respect and admiration in serious art circles. But his work has never been easy to love.

His latest paintings are as cacophonous and jumpy as ever. To his characteristically dense and brilliantly colored surfaces, he adds collage elements, like mops. At times the effect is leaden. More often he achieves a kind of heady opulence. The images, as usual, include dismembered figures of childlike, Dubuffet-like oddity, combined with architectural elements in compositions that at first seem

to be tumbling and churning out of control. In fact, there's an underlying orderliness to these vaguely urban scene paintings that derives from the structure of the Cubist grid and makes itself apparent only slowly. (It's worth recalling that Mr. McNeil was a founding member of the Cubist-influenced American Abstract Artists group in the 1930's.)

In archetypal Abstract Expressionist fashion, his images emerge from the activity of painting and not by careful design. An argument can be made for their psychological intensity, mixing sexual and violent references as they do. There's also a kinship between his work and 1980's Neo-Expressionists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose graffiti-derived scrawls and markings also draw from the energy of the streets. But the strength of Mr. McNeil's art continues to reside principally in the joyous, no-holds-barred, over-the-top extravagance of his technique.

A version of this review appears in print on April 2, 1993, on Page C00029 of the National edition with the headline: Art in Review.