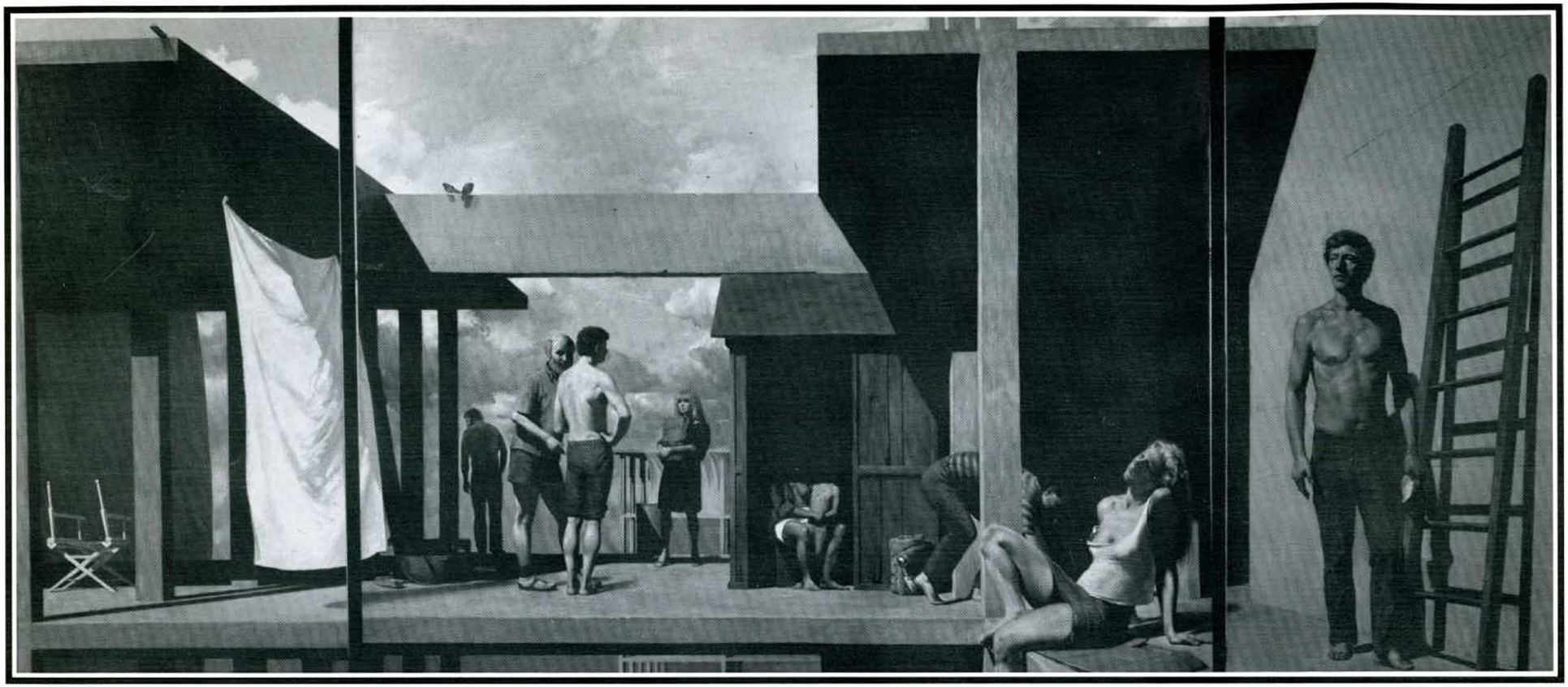

THE BIG PICTURE

Contemporary Paintings In The Heroic Mode

RIVERSIDE ART MUSEUM

OCTOBER 20 – NOVEMBER 25, 1990

COVER:
Exile
1982–1990
Jan Isak Saether

This exhibition was sponsored in part
by a generous gift from
Mr. and Mrs. John S. Colladay.

FIG. 1:
The Devil Gets His Due
1990
Cynda Valle

THE BIG PICTURE

Contemporary Paintings In The Heroic Mode

When the famous American painter John Singleton Copley was pursuing his career in colonial Boston, he often complained that the only kind of art people would pay him to produce was portraits. Not content to work solely in that genre, he eventually moved to England, where paintings of more complicated subjects – stories from the Bible and classicial mythology, as well as military and political themes – were held to be of greater interest. This type of work, referred to as history painting, was considered the highest form of art in Europe, for aside from involving complicated poses and scholarly subject matter, such themes were thought to convey moral lessons and spiritual values that went beyond mere appearances.

In the 20th century, history paintings still have received only intermittent acceptance in American art circles. Subjects expressing political viewpoints enjoyed limited popularity in the 1930s, and some found in Pop art elements of social criticism and satire. But, for the most part, abstract art has received the most attention in America, particularly after World War II. Usually critical response to these works have been formalist in nature, where discussion is focussed on purely aesthetic considerations of form, line, and color.

However, as the century draws to a close, many artists are again returning to humanistic subjects. In the 1970s, figure painting began to enjoy a conspicuous revival, and more recently figural pieces seem to function in allegorical ways reminiscent of the Old Masters. Perhaps with a heightened interest in social issues – minority concerns, the environment, religious scandals – artists have felt compelled to comment more directly on the world they see around them, and on man's inreraction with it. This exhibition presents a selection of such paintings by artists who work in this "heroic mode": who choose to deal not exclusively with formal innovation and technique, but, both physically and spiritually, with The Big Picture.

In pursuing humanistic, timeless themes, many artists in rhe exhibition adopt motifs and compositional arrangements reminiscent of Renaissance paintings. Cynda Valle's **The Devil Gets His Due** (Fig. 1), for example, recalls images of God the Father enthroned in Heaven, i.e., floating majestically in the sky. Valle's Godhead, however, lacks the grandeur and fortitude of his Italianate predecessors; he is presented as a somewhat nebbishy, casually dressed Angelino, ineffectually clutching an assortment of Saved Souls. More imposing is the devil figure behind him, a smirking, paunchy biker, who plucks a figure from the bosom of God to deposit in the pail he holds on his left hip. Valle comments that, in her view, Los Angeles provides a vivid setting for ever-shifting moral choices; people are always fluctuating between good and bad, sinning and repenting – enjoying political success one moment, under indictment the next, gorging themselves one week and going on a crash diet soon thereafter. Thus, in allegorical terms, she points to the slippery ethical climate of the times, ironically comparing it to past historical epochs where moral dogma was passed down to the masses with far greater authority.

Jan Saether also adapts Renaissance-derived techniques and subject matter to contemporary themes and preoccupations; the grand dimensions of his monumental **Exile** (Cover) recall the great masterpieces of Italian

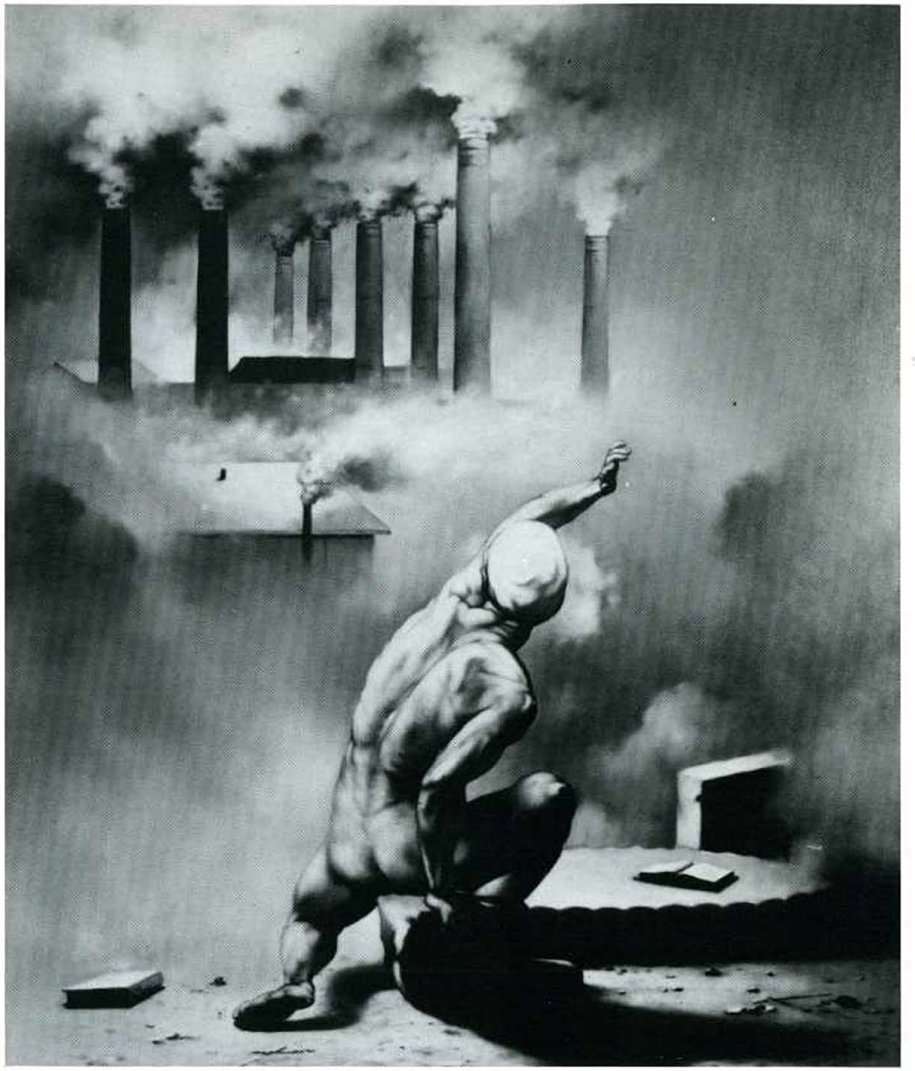

FIG. 2:
The Industrial Age #2
1988
Alan Sonneman

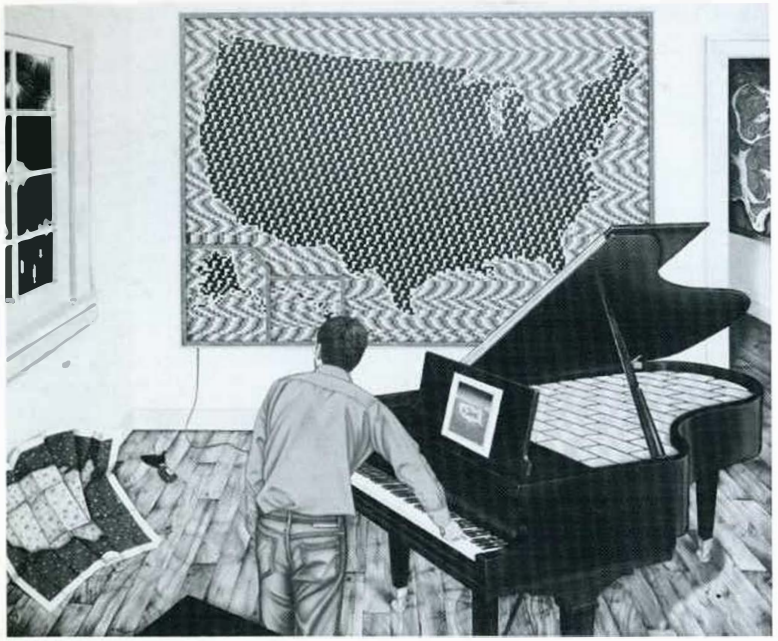

FIG. 3: ***National Anthem*** 1988 Bobby Ross

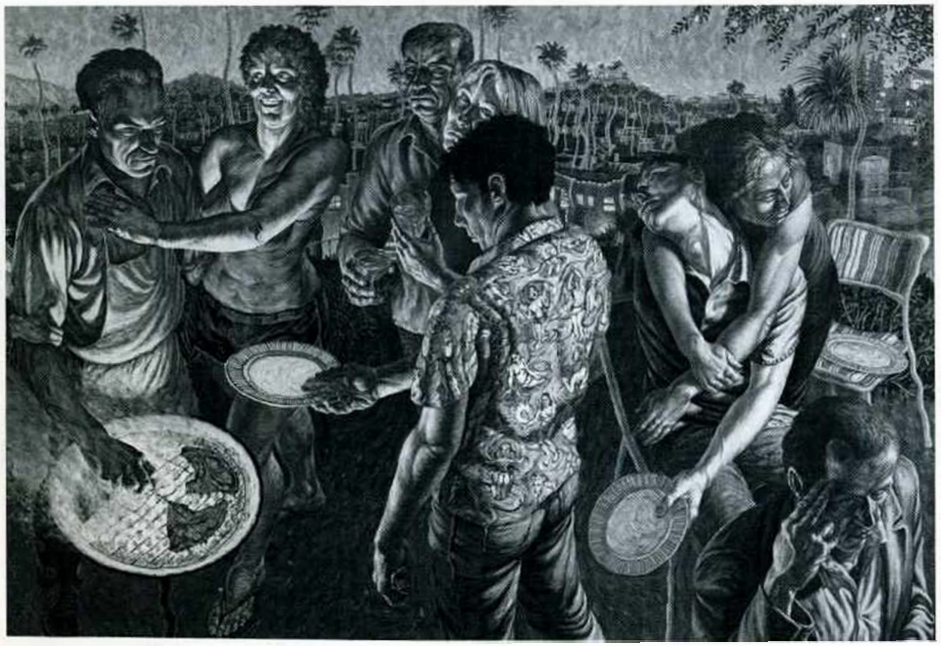

FIG. 4: ***X-mas B.B.Q.*** 1985 F. Scott Hess

fresco. Typically, life-sized figural groups were painted directly on the walls of a church or civic building, so that the public could actually see sacred stories or important historical events practically come to life before them, an ever-present source of knowledge and inspiration. Similarly, Saether's figures seem ready to step out of the picture and address us directly. Among the most important artistic preoccupations of the quatrocento was the newly rediscovered science of perspective, reflected in the artists' tendency to incorporate elaborate architectural structures and interior spaces within their compositions. Historians have seen in this tendency not only a delight in the artist's ability to portray convincingly a three-dimensional space on a flat surface, but, more poetically, a reflection of a new confidence in man's place in the world, where man, his creations, and nature all seem to coexist in perfect balance and harmony. In Saether's Exile, however, this optimism is nowhere to be found. In lieu of Renaissance palaces and church interiors, the artist has depicted what appears to be a construction site (albeit a beautifully proportioned one) where plain wood boards, concrete flooring, and a flimsy hanging sheet subdivide the space. Within this space Saether arranges his figures not for the purpose of telling a story or describing a specific social situation, but rather to convey a sense of isolation and introspection. While in close physical proximity, his characters do not speak or acknowledge one another in any direct way; most seem lost in their own thoughts and rather tentatively posed, as if uncertain of what to do next. Adding to the resulting sense of transience and insecurity is the glimpse of a floor below, which similarly seems unfinished, suggesting rootlessness and lack of foundation. The architecture enhances the figures' separateness, creating barriers that are both physical and spiritual. Even the ladder at right, a traditional symbol of hope and transcendence, offers no ready means of escape; it stands unused against a blank wall, pointed heavenward but seemingly as ineffectual as the backless captain's chair at the opposite end of the platform.

A similar feeling of pessimism imbues Our Father's House by Paul Sierra. "I have a sorrow that there is no God and no heaven," he has said, though his extensive use of Christian imagery in this painting belies a certain nostalgia for the comforts of religion. Like Exile, the composition is divided neatly into three parts, like a Renaissance triptych. At center an elaborate building floats precariously in the sky; its multicolored arches and colonnades suggest a Renaissance church jazzed up like an amusement park ride. Airborne cathedrals are commonly used for representations of the Holy City as described in the Book of Revelations in the New Testament, but *this* Holy City remains tied to the earth; it seems vainly trying to escape the sharp-edged wall that once encircled it. Traditionally a symbol of paradise and life everlasting, the cathedral here seems forbidden territory to the grim townscape before it, where buildings huddle together in the darkness like frightened refugees. At right an austere angel of death sweeps up from the corner; his hands are crossed in a gesture of acceptance, as if there were no choice but to acknowledge the grim implications of the tableau.

The relationship of man to technology is a theme that runs through much of Alan Sonneman's work. In The Power of History, a man ecstatically joins two live electrical currents, sending a shower of dazzling sparks outward to illuminate the ruins of the many-columned acropolis on which he stands. The artist contrasts the weighty, fluted columns – in decay but still powerful and monumental – with the bright but evanescent energy of the electricity, suggesting that modern scientific achievements may be thrilling to behold but of dubious aid in the understanding of human history. The Industrial Age #2 (Fig. 2) further comments on man's predicament: the heroic nude, signifying since ancient times man's spiritual health and confidence in himself, here kneels in awe before towering smokestacks, ominous modern descendants of the Greek columns. Despite his strength and suppleness, the hero seems to cower when confronted with

his own creation; the machine has developed a willful personality of its own.

No less than seven variations on a map of the United States appear in Bobby Ross's epic **National Anthem** (Fig. 3); they adorn a space in which the artist himself appears perfunctorily playing a single note on a piano. The musical tone is undoubtedly muted by the gold bricks laid over the sounding board of the instrument; while he plays he stares out the window to see, presumably, "the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air." But the painting, unlike the song, is hardly a stirring paean to liberty. On the contrary, the sharply delineated interior alludes to closure and confinement, not freedom, and the objects within the space are puzzling and assertive. Dominating the back wall is a large, electrified image of the U.S., undoubtedly computer-generated. Certainly not without energy, but also gaudy and repetitive, the map invites us to consider the more self-aggrandizing and mechanistic aspects of our national persona. Negative qualities are reflected in the other maps as well, one of which presents a barren, lunar landscape, another spilled ink, another raw meat. While probably not intended as completely decipherable, these symbols suggest a critical stance toward American politics and values, though the artist's straightforward use of fantastic elements within a realistic setting injects a certain whimsy and deadpan humor into the piece.

Double-edged humor also pervades the work of Scott Hess. The dramatic chiaroscuro effects in **X-mas B.B.Q.** (Fig. 4) recall baroque treatments of Nativity subjects, where the miraculous light emanating from the Christ Child reflects on the faces of the adoring attendants, and serves as a dramatic focal point within the night landscape. But Hess's painting is baroque in another sense of the term. It's still Christmas, but in place of Jesus we have a glowing barbecue grill, and the celebrants no longer kneel in prayer, but gather around in uneasy, distracted poses. Perhaps the cocktail hour has gone on too long, for most of the guests have grown tired, restless, amorous, or a combination of all three. It would seem

FIG. 5: ***Sirens*** 1987 Lincoln Perry

the artist is here making a comment regarding the secularization of sacred celebrations in contemporary culture. While the colored lights in the background remind us it's that holiday time of year, the merry-making seems non-sectarian, season-less (a continuing problem for Southern California) and strictly pleasure as usual.

A gathering of an altogether different sort is presented in **Sirens** (Fig. 5), where the history of the idealized female image in Western art is ingeniously incorporated within a single composition. Reading from left, we begin with the rigid poses of Egypt and archaic Greece, moving on to the more realistic Renaissance modes, and concluding with a more angular, Cubistic nude. The background alludes to the history of art as well, with a flattened pyramid and column included behind the early works, which segues into the deeper spaces of the Renaissance, and flattens out again when we enter the modern era. Furthest to the right a simple Greek amphora stands in a niche, symbolic of the most primal aspect of the female sex – the woman not as beautiful temptress but simply as a vessel, or bearer of life. Painted on a trip to Italy, the work reflects the artist's feelings that, within that culture-laden setting, those images had for him an immediacy and accessibility not possible back home in America. Miraculously, as in a dream, the facts of time and place and particularities of style and subject seemed to melt away in insignificance, revealing only the unadulterated lure and mystique of the eternal feminine.

While painting in the "heroic mode" generally implies the representation of significant human action, philosophic thoughts about man's place in the world frequently enter the realm of pure landscape as well. This is particularly true in American art, where mid-nineteenth century depictions of grand uninhabited vistas took on pantheistic, religious overtones. Influenced by writers such as Emerson and Thoreau, artists found in the dramatic mountain ranges and broad valleys of America an affirmation of the greatness of God, and, more specifically, a sense of God's benediction on the land and its people. As America grew more cosmopolitan and international in its outlook, such renderings were rejected as grandiose and provincial, and the depiction of more intimate, domestic landscapes were favored. But, as this exhibition documents, landscape artists have recently returned to monumentality of scale.

FIG. 6: ***Bright Angel*** 1990 Peter Holbrook

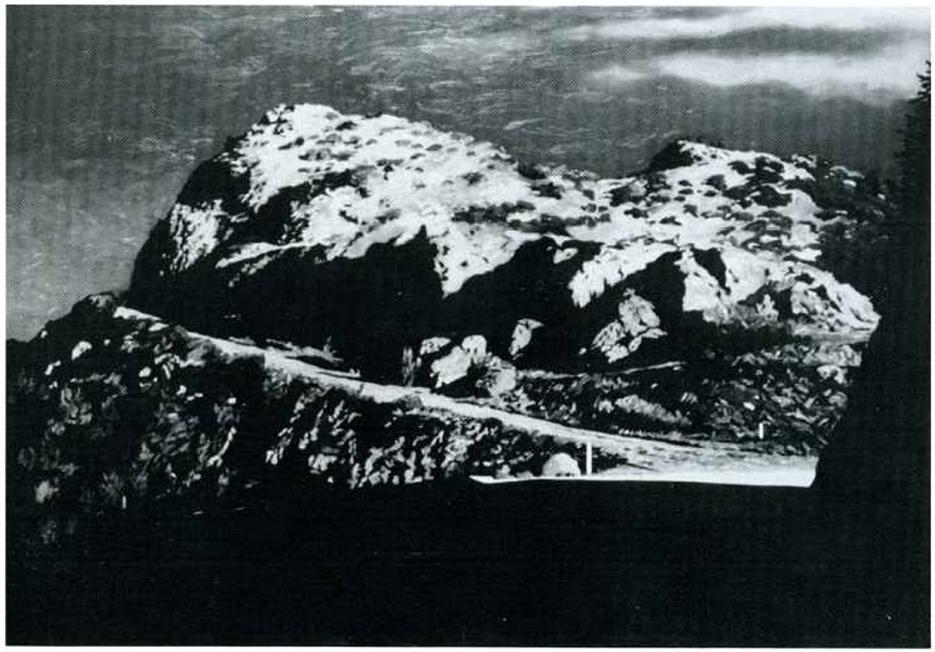

FIG. 7: ***Yerba Buena*** 1985 Bruce Everett

To find subjects for his paintings, Peter Holbrook typically visits national parks or other protected areas, where the landscape remains undisturbed by man's touch. The formations themselves tend to be geologically new, and therefore more immense, with contrasting elements and abrupt transitions. In his basically realistic treatment of these themes, he partakes of the awe and exhilaration that his 19th century forebears found in similar motifs. However, Holbrook chooses not to compose in the serene, hallowed manner of that tradition; instead he eschews idealism in favor of an arrangement that is self-consciously inaccessible. Holbrook's landscapes are rugged and dangerous; his motifs – great boulders, crevices, and expanses of rushing water, seem to allude to human conditions of combat and struggle. Nature is neither the balm nor inspiration to man's activities, but rather an implacable force over which man has little control. (Fig. 6)

Metaphoric qualities imbue the landscapes of Bruce Everett as well. In contrast to the formidable open spaces of Holbrook, however, Everett seems to find meaning and beauty in more mundane images – at least mundane for California. In **Yerba Buena** (Fig. 7), a road winding through the Santa Monica Mountains curves around an unseen bend, creating a sense of mystery and expectation. The golden light, deep shadow, and threatening sky create an aura of dark enchantment, though the Impressionist-derived brushstrokes – short and smoothly sensuous – bring a gentle activation to the work's surface that softens its more brooding qualities. Though not specifically symbolic, the road in Everett's painting cannot help but call up thoughts of a spiritual journey that is not without its perils. For him, the road represents "the almost irresistible urge to keep moving around a corner, or the mixed feelings of anticipation, promise, or maybe dread – or the inexplicable sensations of near bliss that ordinary nature can trip in us spontaneously."

Sarah Supplie similarly makes use of low-keyed subject matter; instead of mountain vistas, she offers viewers quiet scenes of the domesticated Connecticut countryside, as in **Smith Farm Stream** (Fig. 8). Yet in choosing such an imposing scale for the work (and she frequently works even larger) the artist seems intent upon finding drama and spiritual exhilaration within these motifs as well. Perhaps she is not so much concerned with human struggle or achievement, but simply with the drama of light pouring generously over variegated nature, presenting a view of the land as nurturing, comforting, and above all, tranquil. In propounding these qualities, Sarah Supplie comes closest to views of Emerson and the Hudson River painters, who, while favoring wilderness motifs, nevertheless saw nature as beneficent and an ever-present source of spiritual renewal.

Perhaps the most overtly humanistic treatment of the landscape in the exhibition is David Bungay's **Ecce Odocolleus.** Based on locales the artist frequents in the High Sierras, the terrain is presented as extremely rugged, with abrupt transitions from flat glacial lakes to mountains that are alternatively brightly lit or cast in deep shadow, to the speckled granite rock formations ubiquitous in the area. But into this starkly beautiful setting the artist has added an equally elemental human drama. Seen only as insubstantial silhouettes, several hunters have made camp by the water's edge; a tent has been pitched and the bright orange glow of a tiny fire is perceptible next to it. Could this be a comment on the fragility and inconsequentiality of man's pursuits in the face of the majesty and permanence of the physical earth itself?

Absolutely, but that's not all. For looming much larger in the composition than the hunters is the fruit of their labors: an enormous carcass of a deer hangs from a tree at left. Still intact, the animal retains its grace and nobility in death, but the viewer soon realizes that dismemberment and consumption of the animal will soon follow. A moral ambiguity on the part of both artist and viewer thus asserts itself. The majestic landscape and the crystal clear atmosphere which envelops it becomes part of the exhilaration and

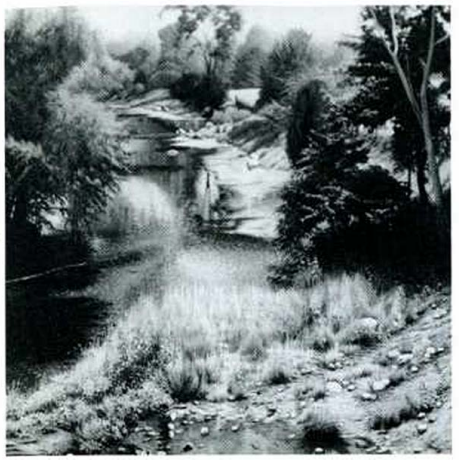

FIG. 8: ***Smith Farm Stream***
1986
Sarah Supplie

primordial satisfaction of the hunter killing and consuming his prey, and thereby sustaining his own life. Yet there is great pathos in the inert image of the dead animal, which is enhanced by the Christian allusion in the title, Ecce Odocolleus ("behold the deer") as a reference to the "Ecce Homo" ("behold the man") theme in Christian art that represents the moment when Pilate presented Christ to the people prior to His crucifixion. As the cross is sometimes referred to as a tree, and the deer hangs literally from a tree, the parallel is even closer. As Christ was sacrificed to redeem man from original sin, and enable him to achieve everlasting life, the artist seems to say, so the deer is sacrificed to support the continuing existence of the hunters.

ROSS C. ANDERSON
Riverside, California 1990

Catalogue Of The Exhibition

David Bungay
Ecce Odocolleus 1986–1990
Oil on Canvas
71 inches x 139 inches
Courtesy the Artist and
Jan Turner Gallery

Bruce Everett
Yerba Buena 1985
Oil on Canvas
72 inches x 96 inches
Courtesy the Artist and
Jan Turner Gallery

F. Scott Hess
X-mas B.B.Q. 1985
Oil on Canvas
67 inches x 95 inches
Courtesy of Ovsey Gallery

Peter Holbrook
Big Donner Pass 1990
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas
46 inches x 60 inches
Courtesy Louis Newman
Galleries

Peter Holbrook
Rocky Gorge on the Swift IV
1985
Acrylic on Canvas
62 inches x 83 inches
Courtesy Louis Newman
Galleries

Peter Holbrook
Bright Angel 1990
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas
48 inches x 70 inches
Courtesy Louis Newman Gallery

Lincoln Perry
Sirens 1987
Oil on Canvas
87 inches x 144 inches
Courtesy Tatistcheff Gallery, Inc.

Bobby Ross
National Anthem 1988
Oil on Canvas
66 inches x 80 inches
Courtesy of Ovsey Gallery

Bobby Ross
Big Plans 1989
Oil on Canvas
67 inches x 81 inches
Courtesy of Ovsey Gallery

Jan Isak Saether
The Magus 1990
Oil on Canvas
84 inches x 56 inches
Courtesy Andrea Ross Gallery

Jan Isak Saether
Exile 1982–1990
Oil on Canvas
108 inches x 247 inches
Courtesy Andrea Ross Gallery

Paul Sierra
Our Father's House 1989
Oil on Canvas
100 inches x 68 inches
Courtesy Louis Newman
Galleries

Alan Sonneman
Dr. Faust 1987
Oil on Canvas
78 inches x 66 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Alan Sonneman
The Power of History 1987
Oil on Canvas
80 inches x 72 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Alan Sonneman
The Industrial Age #2 1988
Oil on Canvas
60 inches x 70 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Sarah Supplie
Smith Farm Stream 1986
Oil on Canvas
81 inches x 81 inches
Courtesy Louis Newman
Galleries

Cynda Valle
The Devil Gets His Due 1990
Acrylic and Oil on Masonite
80 inches x 48 inches
Courtesy of Couturier Gallery

Cynda Valle
Studio View
Acrylic and Oil on Masonite
80 inches x 48 inches
Courtesy of Couturier Gallery

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