



Peter Zokosky, *Vladimir*, 1997, oil on panel, 12" x 9", at Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood.

Peter Zokosky at Louis Stern Fine Arts

Just about any day, you could suggest the world doesn't need any more clown paintings, and you wouldn't get an objection out of me. The genre has been so debased by exploitation and, more recently, so exploited precisely for its debased status, that arguably the only thing worse than a clown painting done by an artist looking to squeeze it for one last drop of dime-store irony is a clown painting done with sincerity. Except one day I walked into Peter Zokosky's first solo show in seven years and found myself surrounded by finely painted mug-shots and profiles of twenty-six pranksters, everyone of whom managed to stare me down.

Zokosky could have taken the easy way out—thrown a few more coloring book-derived funny faces onto the heap of similar paintings pumped out during the last two decades—and in so doing he could have guaranteed recognition for being at least as proficient as the next bad boy in identifying kitsch and pulling the appropriately naughty punches. But Zokosky chose a subject that would almost ensure that he would not be taken seriously, and took it completely seriously himself.

Each figure is given a name which begins with a different letter of the alphabet—all are obscure, but range in connotation from exotic to goofy, grandiose to lame. Zokosky's imaginary friends, and the small panels in which they exist, find their power in their ability to be more than just iconic. Each is undoubtedly a clown, but no two, working within what one might think of as a

rather limited range of variables, seem redundant, and not one seems to match up with the generic image that pops up in one's mind when one hears the word "clown."

Instead, the artist conjures up and delivers twenty-six distinct personalities, handled with the reverence of a hall of fame and with the candor of a study in species variation. Quickly enough, one realizes that the species in question, however, is one and the same as yours and mine, only these ones wear their hair and makeup differently. Their grease-paint betrays the same things most of us fail to hide with our skin—horror, joy, pettiness, vanity, foolishness, compassion, hope and cruelty—huge hearts shackled to tiny brains, grand intellects presiding over empty souls. In the end, these aren't really paintings so much as they are custom-made mirrors, and in a room full of them, anybody can find one that provides a fitting reflection. It's a sensibility that Bruce Nauman likely understood in making many of his video projects (clowns included) and that Goya grasped in his handling of the dullard royal family of Charles IV.

I still wouldn't much argue with the notion that we don't need any more clown paintings, but I'd have to toss in an amendment for the likes of Zokosky. After all, any artist who can show me twenty-six interesting examples of a cate-

gory for which I have limited patience (let alone twenty-six interesting examples of anything) seems deserving of at least such a contingency.

—Christopher Miles

Peter Zokosky, *Clown* closed June 19 at Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood.

Christopher Miles is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.

Peter Zokosky, *Rex*, 1997, oil on panel, 12" x 9", at Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood.

