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Cicero's work walks on the wild side

By Sue Harrison
BANNER STAFF

Stepping into Carmen Cicero's Truro home is a multi-level experience. Like his paintings on display at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, the house spans not only the years but a range of existences. And while he willingly begins to chat about the house's former life as the South Truro train depot, he is less willing to talk about the lives being played out in his paintings.

Cicero currently has two shows up in town. The Berta Walker Gallery, 208 Bradford St., is showing recent work in "Carmen Cicero: Painter" and the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 460 Commercial St., is showing a retrospective spanning 35 years of his career. Both shows opened last Friday; the Walker show runs through Sept. 4, and the PAAM show hangs until Sept. 11.

The PAAM show covers the three major stages of his career, his early abstract expressionist pieces, his colorful, dynamic and sometimes disturbing figurative expressionist work and his most recent "visionary" period with its surreal and dreamlike images that cozy up to you like an extremely odd family member that you are nonetheless happy to see.

The Banner visited the artist at home to talk about his shows and life.

He has curly silver hair framing his handsome face, an aquiline nose and Paul Newmanish blue eyes. His manner is measured but loose, comfortable and welcoming. Cicero is warm, open and at ease talking about everything from the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima to the backlash effects of political correctness taken to extreme and the meaning of life. Still, the real Carmen Cicero as captured in his work remains a little bit of an enigma.

Photos Sue Harrison

Carmen Cicero

"That Existential Stare," the painting Cicero says was the beginning of his latest body of work, the Visionary Series.

Brought up in a more Green Acres than Twin Peaks Newark, N.J., Cicero had clarinet lessons and toiled in his father's rose garden in what he calls a very pleasant childhood. He went into the Army and played in an Army band during WW II. He notes the difference in that era of the public response to the war and the soldiers as opposed to the Vietnam War.

"I was one of the guys headed for Japan," he recalls. "I don't know how other people felt about dropping the bomb but I can tell you how I felt, I rubbed my hands together with delight. I had seen some of the Japanese atrocities. When it went off, there was not a ripple of 'that's terrible.' This was the enemy."

Back stateside, Cicero decided to take advantage of the G.I. Bill and headed for the closest school, Newark State Teachers College. He was expecting to continue his music education but through the school's excellent art department he began to meet a new bunch of people who

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stirred up his imagination. It was the beginning of the abstract expressionist era and he wholly embraced it. "I developed into a good painter at lightning speed," he says. He sold his first painting, to the Newark Museum no less, and his life changed direction.

"I didn't hunt for galleries [to represent me]," he says. "But my friends once picked me up, literally, by the feet and shoulders and threw me in the car and took me to New York." Several galleries expressed an interest in the young artist's work and he chose Peridot.

He was on the fast track. Big museums were picking up his work and giving him wall space. He showed in the 1960 inaugural exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum with Picasso and Miro. Miro was taken with Cicero; he spoke highly of the young artist to others and later sent Cicero a color drawing. Cicero exhibited many times at the Whitney, was in other shows at the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art and was featured in dozens of shows in galleries and other museums both nationally and internationally. His work continued going into prestigious permanent collections here and abroad.

Then, in 1971, things went very wrong. A fire swept through his suburban home, taking away a lifetime of work, personal mementos like the Miro drawing and his extensive collection of musical instruments including a clarinet he says was like a Stradivarius. The loss of his home, his studio and his possessions was devastating but it didn't end there. At almost the same time, his father died, he and his wife divorced and the school where he had taught for seven years refused to give him tenure. He was out of job, a home and a family.

"It all happened at once," he says, adding that he stopped playing clarinet then. Later, he says, as he put his life back together, he picked up the saxophone and turned to jazz. But before that turnaround, he fell into a deep depression and took a hiatus from his artwork. He moved to the Bowery in New York just as the Soho scene was really beginning to sizzle.

"There was drugs and sex and parties," he says. "The streets had violence. The Hell's Angels lived down the block and down the street was a halfway house for prisoners just getting out of jail." A wrong move, an accidental bump into a stranger could mean a fight or even death, he says. At night the streets were desolate, everyone had the good sense to get indoors or get back to a safer neighborhood.

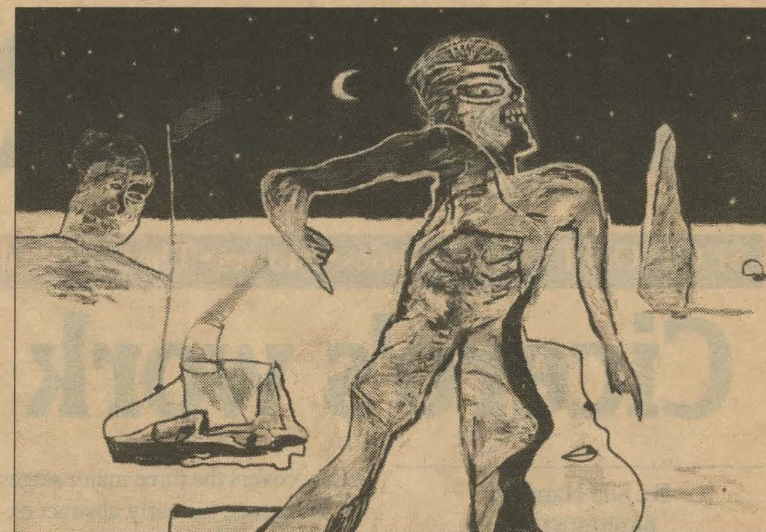
"The first night on the Bowery, there was nothing in my place [a 90-foot-long loft]," he says. "There were no shades. I looked out the window and saw a New York cat staring in, ear twisted, puss running down and I said to myself, 'Looks like I got myself a cat.'"

It was around this time that Cicero painted his first "Battle of the Sexes" with its violent, physical confrontation between a man and a woman.

"I was making pictures about what's going on," he says, refusing to tie his work down with explanations from his own life. "It was not politics, I was not advocating a damn thing." He avoids deconstructing his own work to find the message there and is annoyed by critics who insist on taking that route. For him, the work is ultimately about aesthetics, and he frequently changes bits that either don't please him or that seem to favor a pat meaning.

"Not that I don't enjoy books about artists," he says, "but it's like talking to psychiatrists about dreams, each one has a different explanation for the same dream. I can talk about my own work but even then I realize I'm on thin ice. ... When talking about great work, art or music, after you say, 'Gee that's beautiful,' what else is there to say?"

Part of his refusal to talk about the specific symbols or meanings of his work comes from his desire to not limit the viewer's experience by overlaying it with too much Cicero. He would prefer, he says, that whatever truth is there speak for itself. He also hopes to avoid the trap of having his vision clouded by his passion.



"Nightmare" acrylic on canvas.

"When a man is painting a beautiful model he can get aroused," he says. "Soon, the breasts get larger, the butt rounder." Any passion, he says, can have an altering affect that ultimately takes away from the truth of what was really there.

It's not uncommon for him to revisit a painting and redo sections of it if he decides that aesthetically and truth-wise he's made an error. Some paintings in the catalog for the show ("Carmen Cicero: Paintings — A Survey") have changed since the printing. A black man has become green, the shadow essence of a woman has disappeared, an airplane, once covered in silks, has become almost translucent and glows from within.

In "Satan Takes a Holiday" the car's driver — Satan — originally had horns, he says, before he took them out. But, he adds, if the purchaser prefers he will happily paint them back in.

Although he doesn't want to delve too deeply into today's politics or his own beliefs for the record, he worries about fascism and says that includes some forms of censorship, whether from the right or left wing. "There is profound danger in there," he says.

Moving back to his work, he points out "Nightmare," a frightening image of a man on a desolate moonscape looking plain. A head pops out of the ground, grimacing and the dreamer points down toward his legs with a look of horror. On one leg, a face has sprouted, staring off and the other foot appears to be undergoing the same change.

"That led to my new work [Visionary]," he says by way of pared down explanation.

From "Nightmare," somehow, springs "That Existential Stare" — a dog, or perhaps a cat, with widely splayed front legs, stares out at the viewer with benign, or perhaps malevolent attention, or maybe even supreme disregard. The dog/cat has no rear legs and sits on an indeterminate plain with an eerie, ominous sky beyond with moon peaking out

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from the clouds and sun in a blaze of going down or coming up.

And, as with his earlier work, he doesn't delve too far into explanation. "The best way to get it is to imagine yourself in the picture," he says. In fact, he'd far prefer that you step inside and make up your own reality, your own story, than listen to his. "The idea is not what I feel but what would you feel if you were there? That's what these are about."

Looking back, he says his figurative expressionist paintings were wilder and suited his nature at the time. And prior to that, his abstract expressionist work were wild scribblings. Now, he says, he's beginning to have more personal visions.

"I wish I could actually see them," he says of his internal, enigmatic visions and dreams. "I paint it because it's what I want to see."