

Look Past What You See and Look Again

by Joan Altabe



This is about art that apes an established style but violates the content of the real thing. There ought to be a law.

André Breton, founder of Surrealism, likened the style to firing a pistol blindly into a crowded street. It was his way of saying that the style is about senselessness.

Salvador Dali acted out Breton's definition in a way when he used water in a New York department store window display and the water ended up flooding the street. I mention this to make the point that the Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, mistakenly tagged the work of pop painter Kenny Scharf as "the undisputed artistic descendent of Dali."

Unlike Dali's work, which purposely makes no sense, Scharf's – Disney-cute, message-bearing visions – always made sense. An early work, *Barbara Simpson's New Kitchen* (1978), showed the same concern of his later work: the ecology of planet Earth.

The painting described a kind of '50s sitcom mother, one who might have been played by Donna Reed, gussied up in dress, heels, pearls and a bouffant hairdo, smiling out at the viewer as she stands in her high-polished kitchen. Near her, a monster snake writhes

menacingly out at her from the sink drain, which she ignores.

Sharf's message is clear (that's two non-Dalisms in one sentence): American materialism kills the environment. Hardly the stuff of Surrealism or the mindset of Dali, who once said, "Where does the loony and preposterous Dali end?" Not in America's kitchen, certainly.

Another example of an *ism* gone wrong, again in Florida: A gallery billed an artist called Huldah, "an American Impressionist."

Au contraire. If I were one of the French painters who participated in the celebrated 19th-century movement, I'd be indignant. For one thing, the artist paints women and children in the outdoors with what look like large black holes for eyes. The Impressionists didn't use intense darks as a rule. Bent on capturing the fleeting moment, they filled even their shadows with color on the theory that only images that stand firm could cast a deep shadow.

Again, unlike the French Impressionists, in the Florida show, Huldah used landscapes as backdrops, focusing on "enchanted young ladies, admired in their day for their beauty, grace and femininity." The French

Girl with a Muff,
Cherry Jaffe Huldah



Impressionists did the opposite. They concentrated on the Great Outdoors. People were part of the scenery, but the scenery was the main event.

Calling Huldah an Impressionist dishonors the movement another way. The Impressionists were rule breakers. They revolted against traditional technique. Huldah merely copies a technique.

Not only did the exhibit notes wrongly state that Huldah's work "captures the essence of Impressionism," it ties the wrong artists to the time of that movement. "Sarah Bernhardt, (Giovanni) Boldini, (John Singer) Sargent, the Ballets Russes all have a place in the romance of the period," her exhibit note said. No, they don't. Boldini and Sargent were influenced by Velasquez and the old masters, not the Impressionists; the Ballets Russes was founded in 1909, thirteen years after the Impressionist era ended, and Sarah Bernhardt was famed for great emotional power in classic French plays – a far and tearful cry from the unemotional Impressionists.

If Huldah's pictures look like any of the Impressionists' – the eyes notwithstanding – I'd pick Renoir. Which isn't good. Renoir copied classical painting; he didn't know how to do

backgrounds; and his figures look stuffed with cotton balls, not blood.

Aside from Renoir, one of Huldah's works – *Sunday Afternoon in the Park* – looks like a knock-off of Seurat's famous painting on the same theme. And given her aim, as stated in the exhibit literature, to capture "an age when the art of living was indeed an art," she borrowed from the wrong guy. Seurat's painting depicts the middle class, not the leisure class.

Artists are entitled to bragging rights. But that doesn't mean they get to make up art history. 🐣

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