

FRANKLIN TEACHER CITED

Architectural monuments inspire art achievement

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FRANKLIN — At quick, first glance 31-year-old artist Harrison Burns may seem a paradox.

What's the chairman of the art department at Rutgers Preparatory School here doing domiciled on the Bowery in New York City?

And how come a habitant of a loft in the Bowery opened the season of the prestigious Fischbach Gallery in uptown Manhattan with an exhibition of 36 paintings devoted entirely to graphic portrayal of two of the world's most famous architectural monuments, the Taj Mahal in India and the White House in Washington?

Of course, the Bowery no longer is just the haven of down-and-outers. Today the Bowery is part of the mainstream of American art.

"All the artists are moving to the Bowery — Soho is so commercial," explained Burns, who for the past year has occupied a 25-by-100-foot loft on the Bowery, two thirds of which comprises his studio and the remainder serving as his living quarters.

Burns' Bowery neighbors include artists Robert Indiana and Jasper Johns, the latter his favorite living artist.

Nor is the fascination with the Taj Mahal and the White House as paradoxical as it seems either.

Burns, who received his master of fine arts degree from Rutgers University in New Brunswick in 1972, was preoccupied with video images as an art subject when he came to Rutgers Prep as an art teacher in the spring of 1971. At that time he painted big canvases featuring television sets with images copied from actual telecasts on the screen and often mounted photographic paintings of TV images on the screens of old, inoperable TV sets.

"All these are based on video image," he said of the new series of acrylic and oil paintings depicting the mausoleum for the wife of an Indian monarch and the United States executive mansion.

Burns, who has been working on the series for about four years, received his initial inspiration from a TV news telecast.

"I was watching Nancy Kissinger at the Taj Mahal. I was struck by the brightness," he said. "The next split second there was Nixon on the Truman balcony at the White House."

He said, "I thought these two white buildings, what a thing to deal with. Two buildings, both classical — investigating two entirely different cultures."

Burns' White House paintings are based on photographs he took himself, when "I got on the grounds through a friend of mine." Numerous pictures by others of the Taj Mahal were used, for he's never seen that building, but "sure would like to."

The artist mused, "The White House is such a complicated subject matter. The way I approached the Taj Mahal is different from the White House. I think my paintings of the White House seemed to be brittle. The Taj Mahal is softer."

He found it "such a strange feeling to be working on the White House with Watergate on the news in the background."

Burns' series of 36 paintings at the Fischbach Gallery — two of them large canvases and the other 34 small works on paper of the same size — drew attention and acclaim from Richard Howard, the art critic and 1972 Pulitzer prize poetry winner.

Writing in the November issue of *Art* magazine, Howard explains "why, I think, he has chosen these two buildings, these stabled white elephants, the rhetorical mausoleum and the executive mansion."

"They work for him, and for us, precisely because they have no more than the meaning of familiarity, because they are susceptible only to the assertion of our claim to prevail over our experience which we call style," he wrote.

Howard describes the paintings as "the collages of technology which constitute our image — repertoire of imperium."

"I call it the first suggestion because it is precisely our technology which has accustomed us to seeing through local conditions ("snow," "image drift," "ghost figures," "blips," "flip lines") to the content, through the medium in order to apprehend more matter with less art; and it is only later that we discover to what a degree the television tube has taken over our taste for what used to be called reality," writes the critic.

He rhetorically queries, "Is the suggestion true, though — is it true that a despot's monument to a foreign woman who bore him a child every year for fifteen years is somehow to be regarded in tandem with our democratic shrine to domesticity-as-government? Is there something in these pleonastic plasticities which is telling us that even now there is a Whited Sepulchre in the seditious tropical surround of Pennsylvania Avenue?"

Howard answers, "I think not — I think the painter has seized upon a

subtler bond, even a simpler one, in his presentment of these celebrated structures."

It is the critic's opinion that "Napaul's horror of Mogul waste and failure and oppression has not been lost on Burns, at grips with 'actuality' for the last decade in his grasp of the medium through which all the world apprehends itself most readily... He is concerned — Harrison Burns is concerned, to the point or patch or plane of corruptive dramatization — with how we see something, not with what we see, he is concerned with how it moves, being stationary."

"So Burns has taken two of the most recognizable piles in all the world and made them dance," according to the critic.

Howard describes: "He begins with a black-and-white study, as all of us began with that apprehension, on our first television sets: then he allows shadows, the ghosts to creep in, the image slips and we no longer know as the saying goes, which end is up — reality divides and vision conquers, as the visionary reality condenses our confusion. To these initial floundering, the chromatic fantasy contributes a further bewilderment — who ever saw such colors, such faded structures, as if the first color-television sets made all our living-rooms into mesocallid dens."

The critic sees "a kind of glee, a painterly euphoria in the way Harrison Burns takes to television — he can go very far in his assimilation of the preposterous device, so far that sometimes we gasp and implore him to hold back, for he has told us more about our habits of beholding than we care to admit, more than we dare to admire."

For those fortunate enough to have seen Burns' paintings, Howard concludes, "we hear the blood beating in our own eyes, as in the eye of the camera, the dark room which is the eye of Harrison Burns."

The artist already has benefited monetarily from the recent show at Fischbach Gallery. His 54-by-66-inch acrylic on canvas of the White House titled "South Portico" was bought by American Telephone & Telegraph Co. for its corporate collection and a smaller acrylic on paper of the same subject now is in the Chase Manhattan Bank collection. Another of his paintings from the series was auctioned off in Brownsville, Texas, at \$6,200 for the benefit of endangered species of animals.

Burns enjoys his combined career of artist and art teacher too, insisting, "Sure, it works out fine." He explained that the two jobs "are compatible."

As chairman of art and teacher of art



Home News photo

WORKSHOP OF TECHNIQUE — Harrison Burns, left, art chairman and art teacher of the upper school at Rutgers Preparatory School in Franklin, gives East Brunswick junior Robert McCaffrey some expert tips in the classroom.

to the upper school at Rutgers Prep. He has "enlarged every area of art in the upper school except for sculpture." Art is now a full credit elective providing progressive studio courses for more than 100 students from the 9th through

the 12th grades. Two years ago he introduced a course in basic graphics that includes printmaking and photography and he said that "students now are doing a lot more in terms of painting."

Burns' students have done him proud too. A graduate now is intent on an art career at Philadelphia School of Art and four of his current students are enrolled in an extra Saturday class at Pratt Institute in New York.