

ART

By Eileen V. Watkins

While intellectuals tend to disparage television and popular movies, a growing number of artists use the electronic media as a source of inspiration.

Harrison Burns, for example, is fascinated by the *film noir* of the 1940s and '50s, and by movie and TV programs today that have the same feeling. The New York artist shows his "Paintings Noir" through Nov. 21 at the Rabbet Gallery, New Brunswick.

Burns works in acrylics using an industrial spray gun, and often reproduces the pixels, raster lines and roll bars of the video screen. He creates stencils from his original drawings so that he can create ghostly echoes of an image, as it might appear in a poor TV transmission. While the mood of his work is usually "dark," the actual color scheme may be either black and white or very vivid.

He freezes a scene from Franco Zeffereilli's made-for-television movie "Jesus of Nazareth," in which Mary holds the crucified Christ, for "Piedad." Although "ghost" silhouettes of the kneeling woman are repeated in bright, primary hues, this only heightens the sense of intense emotion.

Burns extracts several scenes from another TV movie, "Murder in Malibu." He gives us an exterior shot of a beach house, tinted by a test pattern of color bars, and a seascape beneath an ominously lurid sunset. Cryptic interior views of a man holding two other people at gunpoint, and a woman swinging a baseball bat in a darkened living room, appear in both black-and-white and gold-and-purple versions. Sharp contrasts between light and dark areas, combined with more "ghosts," add to the mystery.

Hues of gold, navy and maroon create a fear-saturated feeling in scenes of a woman walking down a lonely street, bracing in a defensive pose and peering cautiously through a door, all taken from "The Terminator." The modern version of "Cat People" is the source of another suspenseful vignette; a man lying in bed raises his hands to shield himself from a huge black panther that looms over him.

A cloaked figure in a broad-brimmed hat stalks a Victorian woman, in a scene sometimes broken by a



horizontal "hold" bar, from the older horror film "House of Wax." Burns, who chairs the art department at Rutgers Preparatory School in Somerset, points out that the violence in his paintings is always veiled, never explicit.

Mindful of art history as well, Burns looks back to Francisco Goya for two of his more harrowing canvases. He turns the master's portrayal of "Saturn," as a madman devouring his own children, into another horror-movie image, somewhat blunted by a vertical bar and scan lines. "Execution in Iran II," which shows many blindfolded corpses hanging from ropes while oblivious soldiers stand by, is a tribute to Goya's masterpiece "The Third of May"; it emphasizes Burns' philosophy that the images we see on television can have as much validity as those conveyed by "serious" art.

The one-man show can be seen tomorrow, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., at the Rabbet Gallery, 120 Georges Rd., New Brunswick.

(Above) A detail from Harrison Burns' "Cat People I," on display at the Rabbet Gallery in New Brunswick.