Style

Work of Mourning

Artist hopes art show will open eyes

BY JO MARKS RIFKIN
Staff Writer

Richard Rappaport paints when something bothers him, and the 60-year-old native Pittsburgher has been bothered for much of his life — about the Holocaust.

His paintings for the gallery show, Ashes in the Wind: The Work of Mourning at the Garfield Artworks from Feb. 4 to 25, are bold and larger than life, but they aren't likely to make him wealthy.

He hasn't thought about pricing the unframed canvases — primarily of nudes — of lifeless women buried in snow or flames.

Most of Rappaport's works are from 1997 and are large — 4 feet by 7 feet and 4 feet by 10 feet. Although primarily of the Holocaust, Ashes in the Wind: The Work of Mourning is for all the hatred perpetuated against the world.

Ten years ago the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camps, sparked Rappaport's artistic need to commemorate the loss of so many innocent lives. As a result, these single-figure, iconic works are meant to be vehicles for meditation.

There are those who may prefer this commemoration be abstract, but for Rappaport, unless a message is anchored in form, it will not hold memory.

The pieces of lost women, often surrounded by red flames or white snow, are somewhat primitive, representing the base mentalities of humankind.

"I do not do art for art's sake. I'm a figurative painter," Rappaport said.

He hopes the nudity will not offend viewers. He followed the Germans' lead, he said, stripping people for ovens and for graves.

In "Schneeloch," German for "Hole in the Snow," his blue nude seems almost embryonic, encased by sterile snow.

Rappaport, who was born and raised in Squirrel Hill during the Holocaust, began painting when he was 2.

For five decades, his work spiraled to and from the Renaissance ideal, as his life changed.

He graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1966. A master painter with a classic art background, he was runner-up two years later for the Rome Prize, and then spent three years in Paris.

There, he was influenced by collections of African, Oceanic and Romanesque art, similar to the ones that propelled Picasso.

Rappaport let go of his realism for the magic of the primitive and later returned to more realistic imagery.

Two of his works, from "Joseph in Egypt," a triptych he painted in 1970-71, hung for three years at the Public Theatre in New York at the invitation of Joseph Papp.

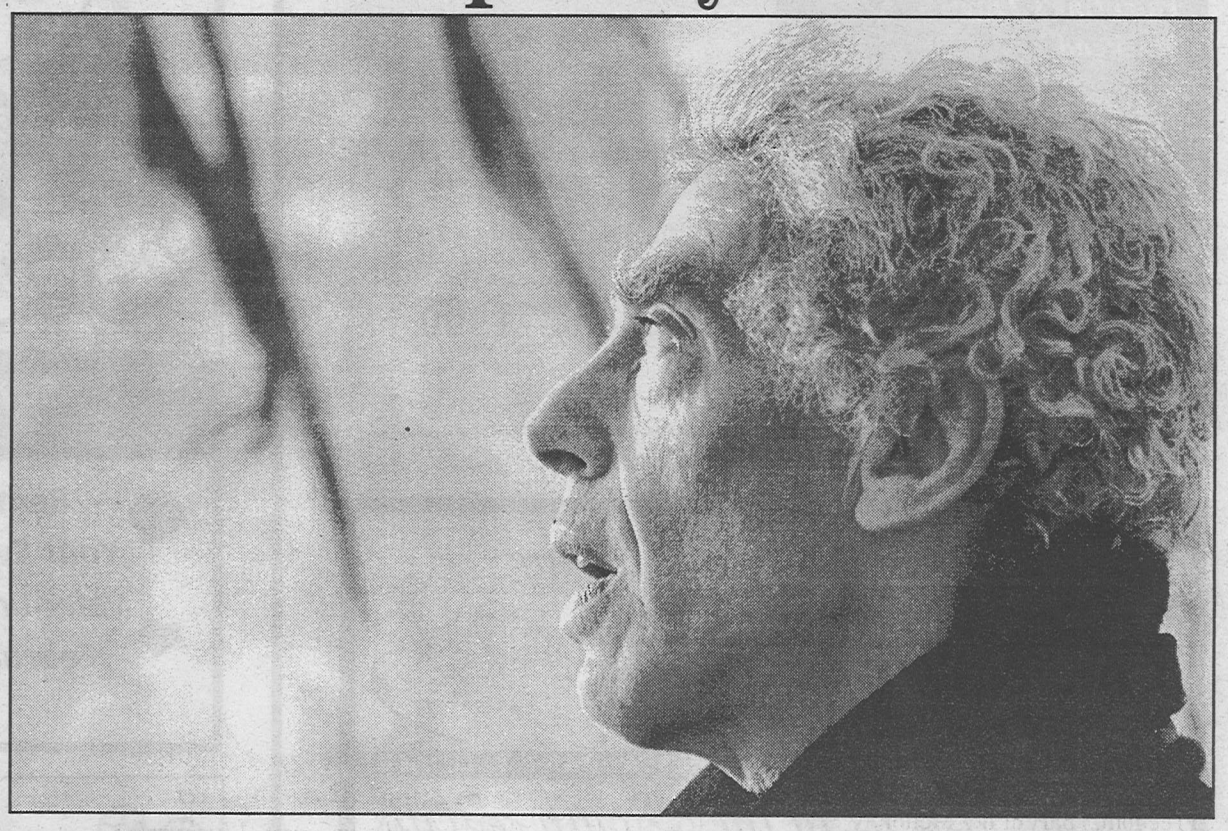
But that work would be out of place among his all-nude show, with the exception of a self-portrait ("We needed to fill the space," he said) and "Ship of Fools," a Vietnam era composition with its Japanese influence and hint of Chagall that shows what happens "when a whole population is dragged into a war against its will: then and on 9/11," Rappaport said.

Rappaport believes the Vietnam era was freer than the Iraqi era.

"There was no Patriot Act, then," he said. "We had the right to protest. Police brutality was an aberration and wasn't coming from the top. In order to protest today, you almost have to make yourself a martyr.

"We must talk about these things and reflect upon these things," Rappaport said. "I wish the world wouldn't be so hateful toward each other so I could paint girls for the sake of painting girls."

(Jo Marks Rifkin can be reached online at jrifkin@pittchron.com.)



Chronicle photo by Christopher Rolinson

Richard Rappaport among his works on display at the Garfield Artworks in Garfield.

Want to see it?

Ashes in the Wind: The Work of Mourning, paintings by Richard Rappaport, will be on display Feb. 4 to 25 at the Garfield Artworks, 4931 Penn Ave. The preview is Feb. 3 and the opening is Feb. 4, both from 7 to 11 p.m. Concurrent with Friday's opening, the artist will host an Open Studio at 5119 Coral St., across from the Waldorf School. Call (412) 362-7735 for additional information or for a personal appointment after Feb. 4.

Covode Street a truly honorable address

SUSAN JACOBS

When I was preparing to move to Pittsburgh a few years ago, I had little time to find an apartment. Through an online search and some phone calls, I managed to set up a few appointments with rental companies to view apartments during a two-day visit to town. The apartment I eventually signed for seemed like it was meant for me — it had everything I needed, and an unexpected perk: it was located on Covode Street.

Covode Street, you may ask? What's so special about that? Well, in addition to being a word that telemarketers inevitably mispronounce and misspell, it also sounds just like the Hebrew word for honor or glory. When I give Hebrew speakers my address, they are usually quite impressed with where I live. "Honor" Street sounds like it's fit for a king.

Adding to the serendipity of my address is that Covode Street intersects with Yeshiva Way, an alley that runs behind the Yeshiva Boys School. Could there be a more Jewish intersection? I suspect that Yeshiva Way was so named because of the school — a gesture to well, honor, the school and its place in the community. The origin of Covode Street is less obvious.

After years of wondering about its name and whether there was really a connection with its Hebrew homophone, I decided it was time to find out. I placed a phone call to the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center, and archivist David Grinnell responded to my query, saying that he presumed Covode Street was named for a 19th century United States congressman from Westmoreland County named John Covode.

This was what I had expected. Many streets are named for people. Forbes, Braddock and Penn were all men who played significant roles in Pennsylvanian history, so it's not surprising that Covode also was a state leader. However, one has to suspect that the size of a street is analogous to the importance of the person for whom it is named. Forbes is an important thoroughfare that is several miles long. Covode is a narrow side street that extends for just a couple of blocks.

But it is equally true that good things come in small packages, and besides, we learn from Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), that "jealousy, lust and honor remove a man from the world." So in the end, it is probably best that there is only so much Covode to go around.

Grinnell provided me with some information about John Covode, and I learned that, among other business interests, Covode owned stock in the Pennsylvania Railroad. As a transportation man, he might have taken an interest in the way streets get named.

Covode was also the father of nine children, and one of his daughters was named Susan, which is as much proof as I need that a person named Susan belongs on Covode.

I am glad to finally know how my street got its name, but don't expect me to start correcting Israelis who respond with wonder when hearing where I live. As far as they're concerned, I live on a glorious street, quite literally.

John Covode may never have known that his last name has such good connotations in Hebrew, and one can only guess if his name came originally from the Hebrew word. Still, I think he would have been pleased that my street was named for him. In fact, I think he would be honored.

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