

Remembering John Der



• MURPHY LAW •, 1994, 20 x 24 in.

John Der left us at the beginning of the year. Too soon, we hasten to add. An engaging man and an artist of great sensitivity, John Der often painted characters rather like himself. They are friendly giants with ham hock hands, all seemingly sketched live by a raconteur of sorts whose great talent we are only beginning to appreciate.

The artist is gone, but his work remains. John Der left us an incredible number of paintings, of which many already belong to collectors attracted by his unique way of translating daily life to the canvas.

John Der created his own country fairs. He painted a kind of rural life that

mixed youngsters, parishioners, animals, and habitants, in other words, a veritable fresco of types, customs and activities representative of the likeable yet gritty world that is Québec. The bulk of his work is somewhat reminiscent of a certain Rubens's masterpiece exhibited at the Louvre in which the notions of movement and liberty are fully exploited.

John Der had a quality rarely found in artists here — a sense of humour! In a genre that verges on debauchery, he remains smiling and friendly. His paintings deal with daily tasks, occupations, and pastimes which are the fruit of his observations and knowledge of the rural way of life, which may be real but remains strange to the many

urbanites among us.

Der's art stands out from the conventional, mawkish art which many Québec painters produce, e.g. dull landscapes, insignificant still lifes, pompous characters and, in the case of abstract art, anemic schemas. Generally speaking, our artistic milieu is too stiff, too timid, too uniform. Our society suffers from a certain moroseness which makes the Juliens, La Palmes, Hudons, Chapleaus look revolutionary. They actually laugh, criticize, and enjoy themselves!

At first glance, Der's compositions show common, larger-than-life figures in compact, glutinous groups. His characters are embraced, attached, grabbed. They have real 'mugs' rather

than faces. Their hands are bloated; their feet, shod in clogs. These people bend their elbow, stuff their face, chew the fat... Their heads sport a shock of hair or a wig, as well as skull caps, berets, cloches, bonnets, helmets, caps and tuques. Their bodies are imposing and their gestures work with the force of gravity. Whatever the circumstances, Der's characters appear in pastel tones that make the viewer forget the medium is oil on Masonite.

Der's paintings remind the viewer of sculptures. The influence of sculpture likely comes from the artist's studies with John Byers. However, Der remained a marvelous drawer for whom line structured each scene. His is a supple, sensitive, omnipresent line.

Born in Canora, Saskatchewan, John Der hung his hat on many a hook across North America and rubbed shoulders with many characters. After living for a while in Toronto, he enrolled in the merchant marine and sailed on the Great Lakes and beyond. He got married in Montréal, where he worked in caricature and comics before studying at the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts. There John met Arthur Lismer, Marian Scott and Jacques de Tonnancour. Colourful, like La Palme and Hudon, Der was often invited to take part in television programs.

Der lived in Rosemère, north of Montréal, where he supported his family by working as an agent and broker. During a trip to Florida in 1982, he decided to devote himself full-time to painting.

The value of an artist is often judged according to the memories and big names that he/she evokes. In this case, the artist leads us not to the impressionists or European landscape artists but rather to Bruegel l'Ainé, Bosch, Callot, Daumier, Rowlandson (British), Kokusai (Japanese), Benton and Cadmus (American), and even Picasso. If the analogy were continued, Rabelais' name might crop up!

In other words, Der was not the artist painting old houses, barns, fences, churches or ruins. His art has always been current and realistic. John Der saw Québec as it is: alive; tender, passionate and always true. He also managed to season his work with fineness and lucidity. **I**

Paul Gladu

The Balcon d'Art on Notre-Dame in Saint-Lambert will hold a "Souvenir" retrospective of John Der's work from November 10 to 19, 1996.



• JAMMING •, 1994, 30 x 36 in.



• ANOTHER TAX •, 1995, 30 x 36 in.



• TOP OF THE ORDER •, 1994, 16 x 20 in.