

John DER

John Der is a terrific and terrifically impressive painter, both as an artist and as a person. He speaks with self-assurance, mainly in English, both with words and with his hands. Hands dominate his paintings, hands that are swollen, gigantic, haunting.

Born in Saskatchewan of Russian parents, young John just got by at school, except in drawing, so it seems. Soon afterwards he would join the merchant marine which would enable him to travel about the world. Fate would have him settle down in Montréal at age twenty, and his taste for art would lead him to enroll in the school of the Museum of Fine Arts where he would attend workshops given by Arthur Lismer, Marian Scoot and Jaques de Tonnancour and would become acquainted with various techniques and materials.

A skillful drawer, he soon found work as a caricaturist improvising before television cameras, and as a cartoon-strip author. While fun, this work brought him neither fame nor money, and as a result, John looked to earn a living elsewhere. His search brought him to the insurance world where he would spend the next thirty years or so, continuing to paint on Sunday – and occasionally on Saturday.

Then in 1982, he decided that it was time to quit – no, not his Sunday painting but his weekday insurance, and he went out and bought an assortment of colours, brushes and panels. The galleries to which he soon took his paintings were somewhat amazed by his work and some offered to exhibit his paintings or him. Things slowly started to get moving.

Paradoxically, Der – almost sixty finds himself in the position of a young artist, timidly trying to find a place in the market.

Timidly, because he is not known. As for his paintings, they have nothing timid about them, showing an obvious maturity, a very personal technical mastery and a highly original style. “Each picture,” he says, “involves a struggle and has its share of conflicts and new beginnings.” His characters seem to be pushing one another to obtain a better place in the painting or maybe even to escape from the painting – who knows? From an empty spot, a nose emerges, a fist closes, a face grimaces. In the background, a landscape takes form with a few strokes of a brush. In a recent painting entitled *Le Juge* a timid crucifix is dwarfed by the monumental profile of a policeman, who in turn becomes a feather in front of the Grand Inquisitor collapsed in his armchair with a finger poking about in his masquerade wig.

You just have to see John Der as he plays out and speaks about his paintings: truly a testimony to the absurdity of the human condition!

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