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Robert Yarber

SONNABEND GALLERY

Robert Yarber's lurid nightscapes treat all the obvious aspects of postindustrial anomie. Mismatched couples quarrel in swank restaurants or lie catatonic in the room-with-a-view luxury of resort hotels. Lonely people drift about in quest of romance, only to wind up bewildered beside motel pools or gaudy strips where neon signs advertise life's most hollow pleasures. In *Rex*, 1990, and *Expenditure of Excess*, 1989, faceless, Hopperesque organization men seek distraction in oppressively overlit casinos.



Robert Yarber, *Ray*, 1988, oil and acrylic on canvas, 84 x 120 in.

Recently Yarber's subject matter has moved up a social notch. Roadside motels and tacky eateries have given way to coastal resorts reminiscent of Rio de Janeiro or the more congested stretches of the Côte d'Azur, but the artist's technicolor palette and camp sensibility, as well as the alternately frenzied and lethargic emotional tenor, have remained constant. The sun, it seems, is always setting on Yarber's world, and the twinkling harbor lights with their promise of romance are as remote as the stars. Fantastic flying people—often couples—drift, dance, and embrace their way across twilight skies providing a certain buoyant humor that offsets the general malaise. Yet illuminated by the harsh beams of helicopter headlights, these languorous, benign, unholy angels all too often grimace in pain or embrace with an intensity that implies the temporariness of their blissful if improbable state. In an earlier work entitled *Beyond Harm*, 1987, a couple executes a desperate midair jitterbug just outside the even more treacherous real world of their hotel suite. It's difficult to determine if Yarber's figures are floating or *falling*, miraculously suspended or, as in an unusual round painting entitled *Plain as a Lie*, 1987-90, plummeting to certain death on the pavement below.

Yarber's carefully constructed compositions thrust the viewer into the position of witness-voyeur, peering in through bedroom windows or out at the airborne figures. By forcing us to contrive narratives that account for what we see—by encouraging us to endow his figures with histories and fates—Yarber's often ambiguous scenarios make us realize that the fragility of hope and happiness is his abiding concern.

—Lois E. Nesbitt