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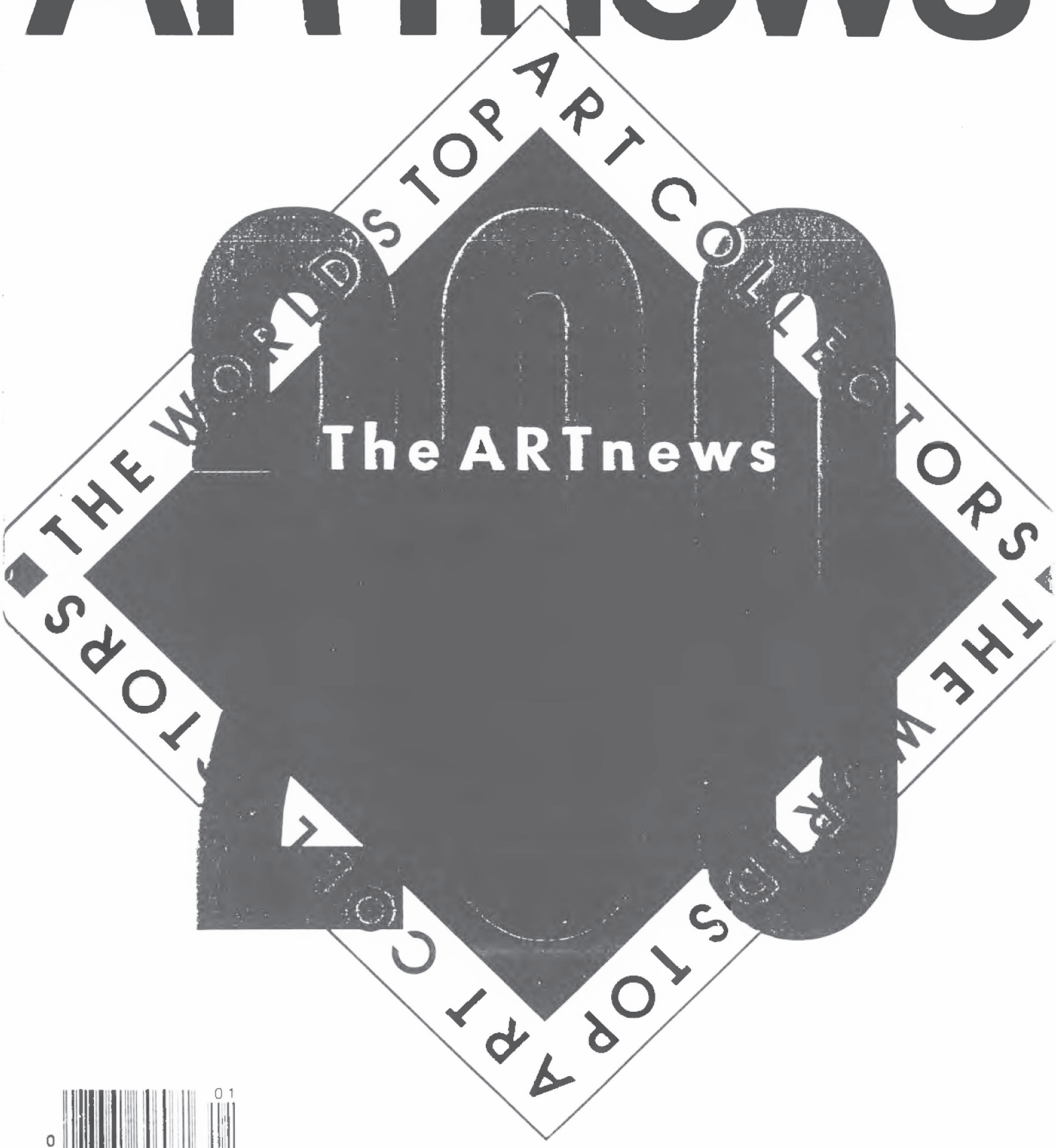

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BY MARY HAUS

robert yarber's unbearable lightness of being

Robert Yarber's panoramic paintings, with their neon colors, charged melodramas, and floating figures, are complex allegories of pleasure and pain

WANDERING AROUND ROBERT YARber's studio is like making your way through the lair of someone who has picked clean vast stretches of visual culture. Amid the usual clutter of a painter's workplace—scores of brushes and crumpled tubes of acrylic paint lie about everywhere—are copies of '40s *Collier's* magazines and vintage Hollywood gossip sheets. Xeroxes of '50s couples doing novelty dances are tacked to the wall next to postcards of Rubens' *Fall of the Damned* and Rio by night. The flotsam and jetsam of high and low culture have been harvested and stripped of their hierarchy. And all around hang the artist's signature falling couples: hovering over a dinner table, tumbling in passionate embrace over a panoramic coastline.

Yarber, 42, is making romantic paintings in art's age of media, bravura gestures in its era of austerity. "He's really come up with a syntax and a structure all his own," says critic and curator Douglas Blau. "It's familiar but exceedingly strange. Nobody's got his sense of color: those kinds of lava-lamp hues. Maybe Fischl hints at the seeming strangeness of suburban life, but Yarber really gives us luridness. Yarber loves that kind of seediness." It's no wonder his art is highly suspect. "They're oddly forgettable. . . . There's nothing at the core," critic Kim Levin wrote in 1985. Last season Peter Schjeldahl sideswiped

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Swamp, 1986. Yarber's melodramatic situations and lurid colors operate at the outer limits of accepted taste in high art.

Yarber's "glib effects with portentous overtones" in a review of his show at his New York gallery, Sonnabend.

"When people are dismissive, I think some of them might be a little lazy," Yarber says with a shrug. He is sitting in his SoHo loft late one summer afternoon. The artist's khakis and gray polo shirt hang loosely over his lanky frame, which he has folded into an old swivel chair in front of a huge new tondo he has been working on. The flailing man in the picture is splayed across the canvas, practically leaping out over Yarber—Giulio Romano via Hitchcock.

Considering the excesses of his art, Yarber himself is surprisingly soft-spoken, almost shy. But intense. He also seems somehow old-fashioned, an impression helped by his soft Texas accent. One friend has described his manner as that of a southern storyteller: the tales he likes to tell segue from early Christian history to science fiction.

He doesn't seem irked by questions about negative reviews. But it's clear that Yarber grapples hard with the leeriness that his lush, unabashedly virtuoso paintings encounter. "I hope that people see that there are different levels of this work," he says, finally.

Always nocturnes, Yarber's pictures most often depict figures that are falling, jumping, or just—somehow—floating off balconies and over motel swimming pools, swept up by some overwhelming physical or romantic passion. In some pictures his figures are held—"emulsified," he says—by the beam of light from a helicopter. The colors are neon, hyperreal, just that far away from black-velvet paintings. This is art about existing on the fringes of society, operating at the outer limits of accepted taste. "In painting in particular there's such a horror of the sentimental in higher art circles," Yarber says wryly.

Hirshhorn Museum curator Ned Rifkin, who first saw Yarber's work in Oakland in the early '80s, when he was a curator at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art, thinks that many critics have lost sight of a crucial distinction. "He's really investigating, rotating, the idea of the sublime and the ridiculous so that it verges on the comical and vacant. But it's more addressing that than embracing it. That's where the irony comes in. The artist's wit distances him from the subject matter. It seems to me that's where wit and irony do function as a tool: to create critical distance."

Often the paintings' titles—*The Tender and the Damned*, *Corruption of Ecstasy*—seem as if they could be tagged to some '50s B movie. But they point to a darker irony. Yarber's casino pictures (lately, a favorite and consuming theme of his), like Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergères*, let us scan a panorama of indulgence, capturing the sense of wanton, dazed activity in the glazed gazes of the people at the gaming tables who are mesmerized by what Yarber calls "the sense of drama about something so absurd." Or, in the midst of an oblivious crowd, couples tussle on the floor, a waiter floats through the window—elements of the absurd that reinforce the alienation that is key to Yarber's work. They are intensely private moments somehow erupting in public, as happens in dreams.

Yarber's pictures work as a series of contemporary parables. His couples are latter-day Paolos and Francescas, hovering eternally over an urban purgatory. His dramas are like the scenes Renaissance painters created in arcaded Florentine piazzas, showing saints and martyrs descending from the heavens onto ordinary folk: events that are odd and even miraculous, transported to the context of the everyday. Except in Yarber's case it isn't a saint or martyred priest appearing but a cocktail waitress or a bellhop.

Despite his pictures' narrative potential, Yarber doesn't

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***Suspension of Disbelief*, 1987. The elements of the absurd that Yarber uses serve to reinforce the alienation that is key to his work.**

like calling himself a narrative painter, although he is often grouped with such storytelling contemporaries, and friends, as painters Mark Tansey and John Bowman. He refers to his vignettes as "moments in the same story," outtakes from an overall drama: the plodding progress of daily existence, with all the exaggerated minutiae and trivialized tragedies that are part of "trying to maintain balance in a precarious world."

It's a universal theme, one that has been explored by Bosch and Brueghel and Goya. In fact, Yarber's pictures draw on a lengthy tradition of formal and thematic conventions. The artist cites specific passions for Tintoretto, Rubens, and Piero della Francesca, for lurid Baroque religious painting, as well as for poets from Dante to Rilke to Rimbaud. Yet he stresses that he is "trying to work through the conventions in a way that tests them, plays with them, repeats them in a way, rather than just adapting them wholesale, as a traditionalist would. I'm sort of being complicit with them, implicating myself with that particular style or regime, without letting it control me."

ARF FRANKLICH

Yarber's workplace. Scraps of popular culture, such as vintage movie magazines, lie scattered among his tubes of acrylic paint.

Yarber believes it is his complicity with what he calls his "demoted" sources—the movie magazines, the Palm Springs travel brochures—that gets him into trouble with critics. "That's dangerous because you're complicit with these demoted forms of consciousness; you're not putting yourself above them. I think this is another reason people are nervous about the work: I ask them to implicate themselves as well," he says.

The '50s setting, for Yarber, only heightens the jarring juxtapositions that he revels in. "It's the near past that we all can recognize," the artist says. "And the midcentury represents in the group consciousness what America is supposed to be: the *Leave It to Beaver* scenario, the suburbs, the wealth. But with the aberrant things going on, there's a sense of that being in jeopardy."

Yarber grew up in Dallas in the '50s. Certain references to his childhood—his "hygienic" suburban neighborhood, visits to the four Holiday Inns his father ran (Robert Yarber, Sr., a real-estate developer, put up the first Holiday Inn in Dallas), his Catholic schooling, his fascination with that religion ("The only time I had ever seen people crossing themselves was in Dracula movies")—surface in his conversation with the same kind of implicit unease that propels them into his paintings. And it might even be tempting—knowing that the teenage Yarber saw President Kennedy's motorcade file through Dallas in the fall of '63, and watched on TV as Walter Cronkite told the stunned nation of his murder—to pin the imminent peril so palpable in his art to his own disillusionment, and that of his generation. "It had some subliminal effect on me I would imagine; it might have contributed to a somewhat fatalistic cast of mind that I've had throughout my life," he says. But he is uncomfortable acknowledging the autobiographical elements that creep into his paintings. This tension between conscious and unconscious self-reference helps hone the edge of his work.

Yarber had always loved to draw, sketching cowboys or angels or aerial views from a very young age. At the school of the Museum of Fine Arts in Dallas, he studied with Roger Winter, a prominent regional artist, and was already taking the sacred and the profane and mixing them up. "I was looking at this really lowbrow illustrator named Big Daddy Roth, who did drag racing cartoons in hot rod magazines," Yarber remembers. "And I would try to emulate his style. The next year I was in Saturday art class and was being exposed to Red Grooms and the Pop artists and Bacon and Beckmann and it wasn't that big a leap."

By the time he got to New York's Cooper Union in 1967, he had already developed his own style: a mixture of Hopper and Bacon that he calls "a psychotic kind of social realism." Drawn to the notion of the commonplace on the verge of chaos, he painted pictures of disorder in coffee shops, like a waitress about to drop her tray on someone (he was working as a busboy at a Howard Johnson), bringing in illustrations from high school science textbooks and the apocalyptic visions of the southern Pentecostalists—the so-called Holy Rollers—he saw around Dallas as a child. At the core was an interest in ulterior states of mind and being.

As a figurative painter among Minimalists, Yarber lacked a sense of community at Cooper. "I was turned off at the time by what I saw as the preciosity of Minimalism. I guess partly in the spirit of the movies and the music, I wanted my art to have the same sense of latitude, grasp of disparate elements. I didn't want to reduce things, I wanted to expand things." So he sought out his peers among a group called the Figurative Artists Alliance, whose more conspicuous members included Al Leslie and Philip Pearlstein. It was an ad hoc gathering; 75 or 100 people would meet every Friday night on East Broadway, where there would be panels on art and politics or allegorical painting.

Yarber attended those meetings regularly for several years, until he sat in on a couple of Hans Haacke's classes and became intrigued by French Structuralist theory. He finally rejected the traditional thinkers of the alliance. And he rejected New York. "I felt there were these cliques; I felt I had to either be with the painters or the Minimalists. I still wanted to experiment and decide for myself and to do that I had to get away from New York." He accepted an offer for a teaching assistantship at Louisiana State University and in the fall of '71 headed back south.

At LSU, from 1971 to '74, Yarber threw his energies into Conceptual art and, specifically, body art, spurred by the

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influences of Vito Acconci and Chris Burden. He was building body machines that he wore, "my homemade prosthetics"—primitive-looking contraptions, such as a body piece that added an extra arm that hung by his side.

"I got very interested in the representation of the body," Yarber says, "psychologically how we present ourselves to other people." Some of the theory of the body that had motivated his Conceptual work found its way into his painting. It was, he says, "the whole idea of the body as willful agent, laboring instrument, or the body as a passive receptor of sensation and occasionally as a rebellious element: through passion or insanity or love or lust. That fascinated me." By 1975 he was making paintings depicting the interruption of the commonplace—represented by distinctively American interiors, backyards, and swimming pools—by "incorrect behavior," combining elements of slapstick that for Yarber were a way of being "antielitest" and drawing on his longtime interest in apraxia, the sudden, inexplicable loss of body control.

Another studio view. Yarber's sources of inspiration run the gamut from Rubens to Palm Springs travel brochures.

The next year Yarber followed a girlfriend to the Bay Area. He was living and working in an abandoned bar in Oakland called The Dead End, near the train station. "I thrived in isolation," he says, savoring even now the prevailing silence punctuated by the clanking of the railroad cars, the fog horn from the bay, reveille from a nearby army base, and chatter from the bordello next door. Ned Rifkin, on that first studio visit in 1982, remembers "rooms upon rooms, a real labyrinth." Yarber began painting intensively, working as a night watchman to support himself. He was starting to get to know the artists in the Bay Area—Robert Colescott, Louise Stanley, Joan Brown—but he kept pretty much to himself.

The late '70s brought two key elements together for Yarber. Always an obsessive moviegoer (back in New York, he would see several films in a day), at Berkeley he immersed himself in the '50s films of Douglas Sirk, the director who created lush period pieces, two of which, *Imitation of Life* and *Written on the Wind*, now have a cult following. The plots (about racial identity in *Imitation* and a patrician Texas love triangle in *Written*) fed into Yarber's inclinations toward melodramatic situations. Even the notion of aberrant behavior was there, in the misfit daughter in *Imitation* and the trampy blond sister in *Written on the Wind*, who, in a classic sequence, does a frenzied, drunken dance in a scarlet negligee to Cuban club music in her room—oblivious to the fact that her father has collapsed and died on the stairway outside. It's a tortured vignette that could well take place in one of Yarber's blue-lit motel interiors. "I'm interested in the idea of . . . how pleasure at some point becomes pain," he recently said.

In Sirk he found "this sense of hyperbolic exaggeration, overdetermined gestures, that was used in order to get across the artificiality of the scene he was trying to describe. It's almost a rhetoric of emotion. And it expressed an emotion while pointing to itself at the same time."

Yarber says he was encouraged by the dialogue among students about the Sirk films. "Coming from the art world, where in the early '70s people weren't talking seriously about imagery in contemporary art, and finding that people were talking seriously about it in film studies, that opened up a sense of a larger dimension and how we can talk about figures in space and the absorption that the viewer has. It buttressed my own confidence that these things could be dealt with in paintings."

Then Yarber made *Neptune Lounge*. It's one of his first bar-interior scenes, depicting several patrons sitting around a curved bar. Seen through a cutaway in the wall are swimmers in a pool; its blue glow limns the foreground figures.

"It was one of those rare occasions where I had this mental image and it really just came out in a lightning flash," Yarber recalls. "I was sitting in a friend's house watching the Miss America pageant or something and I ran out in the back—I had a studio set up on his back porch—and I had a canvas that was primed blue and I really just chalked in the whole thing, the whole composition, in about ten minutes. And years later I was wondering how that had happened. And I realized that it was a childhood reminiscence of a place where I used to go with my parents when I was a kid, in Fresno, California, that had this kind of bar, where you could look through the window at the swimmers in the pool."

So Yarber had found his subject matter, recognizing only reluctantly its autobiographical sources. And he still prefers to see his vision as spurred by a love-hate fascination with middle class luxury, with the ideal flaunted by glitzy Frank Sinatra movies and other icons of American popular culture that he, and many of his peers, grew up with. It's because of that connectedness to American culture that he believes his work "addresses so many people. Whether they go to these types of places or not, they're bombarded with this kind of information through commercials and television."

Yarber may have thrived in isolation, but he didn't stay there for long. In just a couple of years he went from local sensation to the international circuit. While he was still teaching at Berkeley, and later commuting back to the University of Texas at Austin, people started noticing his work. His first solo shows came in 1981 at Simon Lowinsky's galleries in Los Angeles and San Francisco. They were well received—one critic called the paintings "powerful statements about the shallow, empty and meaningless beauty of a contemporary lifestyle"—and several group shows followed. In 1983 Yarber went to New York with new work to show Rifkin at the New Museum. Director Marcia Tucker decided to include him in the show she was curating for the U.S. pavilion at the 1984 Venice Biennale. He was finally

able to resign from Austin in 1984 and devote himself full-time to his painting.

Yarber didn't know that one of his admirers at the Biennale had been Ileanna Sonnabend. One Saturday morning that fall, she called Yarber in Austin from New York, asking him to come up immediately to meet with her. After their first encounter, Yarber made arrangements to move back to New York, with a show scheduled at Sonnabend for the next year. He arrived a few days before his first major New York debut, in the '85 Whitney Biennial. Now, five years later, his paintings are selling for $35,000; a retrospective has just finished touring in the States; and this year he has shows lined up in Geneva and Brussels.

***The Turbulent Kind*, 1989. Yarber's signature floating couples are latter-day Paolos and Francescas hovering eternally over an urban purgatory.**

If Yarber has reined in influences from sources as disparate as the Old Masters and cinema, he has pulled them together to create work that is flagrantly American. And he pushes forward, specifically, the tradition of the American sublime.

Certainly Yarber's settings, especially the vast panoramas of his most recent work, and his atmospherics (the mysterious light, the purple hazes that hang over his backdrops or swathe his figures) recall Frederic Church and other artists of the Hudson River School. But it is also the less tangible notion of the sublime that Yarber is after. "If Caspar David Friedrich found that in an iceberg or jagged mountain slope at dawn—that sense of something that's not human, both threatening and lifting us out of our own context, which is confining at times—I find that in the immensity of the power that's involved in these urban settings," he says.

It is above all the idea of "lifting us out of our own context" —literally, in the case of Yarber's hovering figures—that is key for Yarber, that expresses "the desire for some kind of transcendence." But, he says, "maybe the melancholic aspect of the work recognizes that now a lot of us don't have an object at which to direct our desire, whereas the Baroque had the sacred, the late 19th century had nature, and at some point modern sensibility had science. It's a period of skepticism. But the need or the desire is still there."

In the absence of "real, lived experience" in the contemporary world that can fulfill our desires for something better than we have, than we know, Yarber contends that he has sought that fulfillment in the ideals proliferated by the media, by the film and television that have dominated his generation.

***Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*, 1989. If artists have sought the sublime in nature, Yarber seeks it "in the immensity of the power that's involved in these urban settings."**

"I still have a desire for that experience," he says. "And I've had certain experiences like that. But I've had them in the context of TV and movies. I had my mystical experience from a flickering lake, with the light hitting the water. But then I've had another kind of transcendent moment watching *Picnic* for the first time with Kim Novak and William Holden. And that seems more specific to our culture now. I saw that when I was 12; it was a very important movie for me: that was my sexual coming-of-age movie.

"The important thing is that one would have led to a certain direction in life—if I'd gone with the kind of ecstatic experience of the flickering lake. But somehow, the other one ended up to be the one that defined the direction of my life." And, he might have added, of his art. ■

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