

By GLENN O'BRIEN

THE HISTORY of modern representational painting is parallel to history of the exploitation of the visible and electromagnetic spectra. Obviously painting was transformed by the invention of photography, but the impact of artificial lighting, the flicker of alternating current and clash of fluorescent frequencies, though more elusive, may be as profound. The light of the world has changed forever.

The vibe has changed too. The human aura has been transmuted by the electromagnetic grid. Sensation and desire, like sound and light, are electronically transmitted and amplified. Time too has been altered profoundly as the ancient biorhythms of life have undergone an artificially simulated electromagnetic mutation.

There are North and South poles, both geographical and magnetic, but there are other poles in this world. Times Square is a pole of animal magnetism. It's daylight at midnight. News flashes by on the electronic sign as it happens in the streets. Porn is available for every appetite and inclination: magazines, films, peep shows, dancers. This is Times Square where time is squared, creating infinity in a hall of go-go joint mirrors. Fantasy is industry. Love is a hustle. Crime is a job. Priapism is endemic. Desires are contagious and so are their consequences.

People do live in Times Square, where the environment seems to have a high mutagenic potential. Jane Dickson lived there for many years and not only did she survive intact, she prospered. While most of the neighborhood's residents who are directly involved in the "sex industry" or the drug trade might find it marginally bearable, a purgatory at best, Dickson found it a motherlode of subject matter.

Painters live in such places as Paris or Eastern Long Island because of the light. But certainly Times Square is a place where the light is uniquely "advanced," where a strange and vivid unnatural spectrum blends the erotic come-on of neon with the cheap fluorescence of all night donut shops and the penetrating surveillance of the sodium street lamp. In Times Square, Dickson was initiated into the more advanced degrees of artificial light and she learned how translucence and opacity operate in a world where little is clear.

Dickson's transcendental reportage updates realism with the full blown post-modern spectrum of artificial light. The sun never intrudes on Dickson's pictures. This is a world of endless night, where black light is the beacon of the black hole of desire. There is no land in the landscape, no tree, no leaf, no flora, no fauna; the only nature visible is flesh. The flesh exists in a world of its own, making a labyrinth of textures and wavelengths. Reality and fantasy merge in a landscape of optical illusion. Perspective becomes a trick, or a con, vastly subjective.

In Paradise Alley a man is being held up by a woman. Or is he being held up? Is he being rescued or rolled? Paradise and Hell may be two views of the same picture. I got a fortune cookie two nights ago. It said : "How you look depends on where you go."

In Peep Land we see the entrance to a peep show which has been designed as a giant keyhole. At the top of the keyhole above the door is a giant eye, haloed by light bulbs like a carny version of the Masonic all-seeing eye that floats over the pyramids on our dollar bills. The face of a customer who seems to have just exited Peep Land is illuminated by the lighting of a post-masturbatory cigarette, and we are led to consider that societies may be formed around any sort of secret.

In Peep II a hand is delicately poised over the mons veneris of a peepshow worker. The gesture of the hand is perfect. Behind the dancer we see a row of clients in their small peep windows, like so many television anchor men. The texture of this oil and pumice painting is like stucco, turning the image of smooth skin into an image of eruption, giving this contemporary scene a feeling as ancient as Pompeii. Perhaps this is a hint of the depth of the phrase "time warp," a simple demonstration of outlaw relativity.

Dickson's technique of painting with oilstick on sandpaper and other abrasive surfaces has obvious metaphoric resonance. She's dealing with abrasive, gritty, gnarly subject matter. But it also provides a grainy look that updates impressionism through the eye of the photo blowup and the pointillism of 8mm blown up to 35 for the big screen. It's an impressionist world because here the viewer always has to connect the dots of his own fantasy to get off.

The attritive textures also remind us of the grind of the world, which Dickson sometimes combines with the bump of human nature. Her most recent work, paintings of exotic dancers, many titled Live Girls, is rendered on rough surfaces or on industrial carpeting, and what surprises is that beauty survives the grim ordeals that sustain the body. The human form retains its elegance in drab or even degrading circumstances. And the tough, jagged surfaces remind us of time, the ultimate abrasive.

In some of the new strip joint work Dickson takes a turn toward the abstract, something inherent in the subject matter, because the nude dancer must elicit an abstract, erotic leap of faith/fantasy from her audience to succeed, to get them off. And because the dancer abstracts herself mentally in her performance, making it almost religiously impersonal, the body works the room while the astral soul projects through the looking glass.

In Live Girls IX a dancer bends over and spreads, giving the customers the goods. The gesture is clinical, almost defiant, and in front of the dancer is a bright light source, apparently a television. The dancer would seem to be watching television, lost in the ball game, while men publicly inspect her semi-private parts.

The erotic impulse is never absent from figure drawing. Jack Levine, the social realist painter, has said that "life drawing" is a great reason to be an artist, a great reason to be an art student. I don't think that's why Dickson got into it. I think she drew these nudes because they were there, and not that she had any political program to explain them, but for her they contained mystery, enigma, duality.

These are the moments of erotica in Dickson's investigation of Porno World, but they are subtle details and gestures. The arch of a back. The flick of a wrist. But while Dickson's treatment of the erotica inferno is hardly a turn-on, neither is it a feminist Guernica. It is about the intersections of the personal and the impersonal, the victim and the perpetrator, the erotic and the boring. It is about interchangeability and mutation. It's about polarization and the survival of polarization. And it's about the terrifyingly ancient nature of the momentary.

Jane Dickson's subject matter has not been limited exclusively to the world of Times Square, but her forays outside the neighborhood to the carnival or the demolition derby reflect similar visions. The stasis of action. The archetypal nature of the ephemeral. The mysteries of the obvious.

The demolition derby paintings create an entropic model of the universe. The automobile, a perfect metaphorical vehicle for our society, is not engaged in a race where speed and agility matter, where there is a finish line and time is of the essence, but in a brutal, chaotic, random survival contest of attrition to the death where it's every man against the world and the last one moving is the winner.

Jane Dickson's world is dark, but always illuminated. Eternity is open all night. Nature has been expelled from the garden, but it creeps back into the picture through Live Girls crawling on their bellies like reptiles. When despair is in the forefront there's still hope in the background. This is far from paradise, and it's not Hell quite yet. It's purgatory where deals are still being cut, where escape is an art.

Jane Dickson is not the judge. She's not the jury, the prosecutor or the defender. She's the artist, drawing what she sees in a neighborhood where truth is fiction. Where the body is a lot more electric than Walt Whitman ever dreamed. Animal magnetism. Juice. It's a polarized kind of place. Charged up. Cosmic rays fly out of human bodies, bounce off the streets, ricochet off the glass, get amplified by a million watts of neon and fly up, up into space where they are perceived as radiation from a star by a distant hypothetical witness that might be God.