

Robert and Liz Cenedella: A Mixed Bag of Mastery

Robert Cenedella likes to think of himself as an artist of the saloons rather than of the salons. He identifies with Thomas Hart Benton, who used to say that he would rather show his work in bars than galleries or museums.

"I have the same philosophy," Cenedella says. "And in fact I have sold more paintings from bars than galleries."

Cenedella's most recent ginmill project was a mural for Nancy Whiskey, 1 Lispenard Street, at West Broadway. He also did a mural at Le Cirque, but he's even prouder of this one and relates to the people in it more, because as he fondly puts it, Nancy Whiskey is "one of the last great dive bars."

Cenedella's mural was unveiled shortly after the much publicized unveiling of Edward Sorel's mural of famous Greenwich Village bohemians at the Waverly Inn. Since Graydon Carter, the editor Vanity Fair owns that non-dive bar, the magazine ran a big photo spread featuring celebrants like Fran Lebowitz, Chris Walken, and numerous photo-op stars.

Bob Cenedella doesn't own New York magazine, but that publication recently featured a great picture of him sitting at the bar in Nancy Whiskey, looking a bit like Papa Hemingway with his rumpled fedora and grizzly white beard. And while most of the people in Sorel's mural are dead, most the ones in Cenedella's are still very much alive, with the exception of a few ghosts who once again assumed bodily form for the occasion.

"Most of the regulars showed up for the unveiling last night," Melissa, the barmaid, was saying, as she stood behind the bar on the morning after. And all you had to do to be there was look across the empty room to the mural above the shuffleboard. It brought the antic crowd scene alive like a magic mirror. Looking at all those meticulous haunch-to-paunch portraits, more than a hundred of them, painted either from photographs or from life in Cenedella's studio, as well as such faithfully rendered details as the joint's famous "Bless This House" sign, you could almost hear the roar of their voices and the clink of their glasses drowning out the jukebox.

"We get them all in here," Melissa was saying, mirrored in the mural across the bar as she spoke. "Blue collar, white collar, NYU students, telephone company workers, neighborhood people, artists like Bob, and even a few famous people like the former Mets player Ron Darling, who's a good friend of Billy Wall, the owner."

The mural does the varied clientele and boozy ambiance of Nancy Whiskey so proud that you just know Thomas Hart Benton, as well as George Grosz, Bob's old mentor at the Art Student's League (where Bob himself is now one of the most popular instructors), would have approved.



"Guantanamo Man #1" by Liz Cenedella



"The Nancy Whiskey Pub," Robert Cenedella

But don't get the idea that Bob's work doesn't shine in galleries as well. Right after we left Nancy Whiskey that morning, we walked over to Broome Street Gallery, at 498 Broome Street, to see his joint exhibition with his equally gifted spouse Liz Cenedella, "Mixed Bag: Works for Under One Million Dollars," the title a comment on the market-driven art world and indicative of the sharp satirical sensibility that the couple shares.

While Bob's satirical sense is always in your face, this aspect of Liz's creative personality is less known, since she is most highly esteemed as one of our leading fabric artists. However, she combines her exquisite craftsmanship and conceptual power in "No Blood for Oil," a centerpiece of the exhibition. It's an actual flag-draped coffin, only with large cloth logos for Exxon, Gulf, Sunoco, and other big oil companies sewn over the stars and stripes. Could any statement about the tragedy of the Bush presidency be more to the point?

Liz reveals an even less-familiar aspect of her oeuvre in her sculptures fashioned from found metal, such as "Guantanamo Man #

1," a copper cutout figure clamped with chains and imprisoned behind a rusty barbecue grill; and "Soldier," in which the menacing war machine sports a chimney pot for a head, a shovel for a torso, and brandishes a toy gun.

The raw, funky power of Liz Cenedella's junk sculptures presents a striking contrast to the sumptuous formal elegance of her quilted fabric wall hangings with evocative titles like "Northstar," "Pinwheel," and "Yardbirds Circling" that enhance the allusiveness of their vibrantly colorful geometric and organic forms. Even her utilitarian objects such as decorative pillows and tote bags that send up Capitalism with monetary designs transcend mere craft by virtue of their aesthetic and sometimes satirical qualities.

Other surprises were "Island Landscape," a lyrical mixed media work on found wood and a luminous pastel called "Still Life with Pitcher." One long familiar with the work she is justifiably praised for could only marvel at the heretofore hidden (from this writer anyway) diversity in the art of Liz Cenedella.

For those mainly familiar with Bob Cenedella's large social realist paintings, there were surprises as well: A pair of youthful self portraits and more recent landscapes demonstrated an early manifestation of the painterly finesse that separates his work from the cartoony ham-handedness of Red Grooms, the less biting contemporary with whom he is most likely to be compared. And a group of brush and ink drawings of ramshackle barns, collapsing fences, and bummed up old trucks (some of which have been made into giclee prints) show not only Bob Cenedella's superior draftsmanship but his ability to imbue inanimate objects with affecting social resonance.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of all were mixed media works from Bob's "Easel Series," one incorporating a toilet paper roller, and "Art About Nothing" (composed with empty stretcher bars) that beat the kind of artists they spoofed at their own game. But of course the real crowd pleasers were jam-packed compositions such as "After the Accident," in which various rabid-looking citizens who've stepped out of their vehicles appear about to come to blows, ignoring the elderly lady lying stricken in the gutter; "2001: A Stock Odyssey," depicting the "deja vu all over again" of hair-tearing hysteria on Wall Street; "Rape of the IRT," an antic sex orgy in the subway; and "Impeachment Off the Table," a huge, multi-figure epic, capturing the absurd sweep of recent headline events, from George "Dubya" Bush to Britney Spears, in which Bob Cenedella single-handedly revives the lost art of history painting.

—Ed McCormack