

## Adrian Deckbar: Frame by Frame

**K**rista" is a tall, shapely and attractive young woman with long, soft flaxen hair—the kind of woman men ogle when she moves knowingly down the street. "Krista" was in the business that made those fantasies come true. At times she could be seen standing invitingly in a low plunging, black spaghetti-strapped dress in front of an open hotel doorway. When tricks were slow, she was out along Jefferson Highway across the Orleans Parish line, alluring passing "johns." In another painting, a man's arm appears from the edge of the canvas, his fingers move gently through her hair to the nape of her neck. The provocative story

unfolds canvas by canvas before the viewer's eyes with the stark reality of a voyeur's camera lens but with the emotion of an artist's brush.

Adrian Deckbar's narrative paintings tell about everyday life and, at the same time, mask insight into the artist herself. Like "Krista," the women in Deckbar's 1980 series of paintings entitled *Girls* tell a story scene by scene as though each painting was extracted frame by frame from a big screen movie. Admittedly, Deckbar is fascinated by the cinema and its theatrical uses in her paintings—an obvious California influence on her early career and studies. In fact, her graduate thesis at San Francisco State

University was a series of paintings called *B-Movies*.

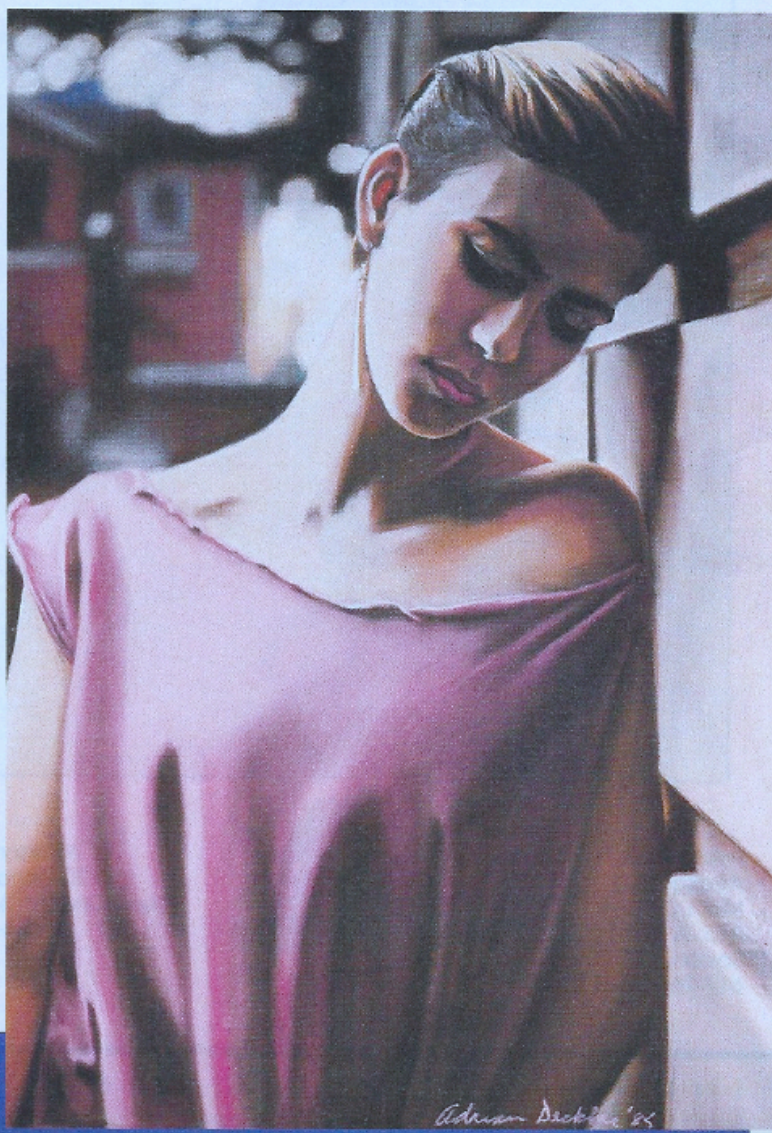
"A good movie will entrance and intrigue me for days," she says. Her "movie" clips get pretty dramatic. In "Scene 3: The Letter," a painting she prepared for a 1985 New York show featuring New Orleans artists, a young woman is sprawled across a rumpled bed, her vacant eyes stare at the ceiling, seeing nothing but her own thoughts. An opened pack of cigarettes and an ashtray half-filled with butts wait next to her. Her left hand, hanging limply across her motionless body, clutches a crumpled letter. She obviously has been there for some time, thinking, wondering. But thinking and wondering about what? A lost lover? A family tragedy?

Deckbar creates the same dramatic tension a movie goer would sense if the film froze on one scene for a fraction of a second before the action reached its climax. You are kept in suspense.

But behind the obvious story line, the artist is saying a great deal about events in her own life that have kindled certain themes. Because of her techniques, especially in the use of photography and insight, she has become an important figure in the contemporary art scene.

Deckbar, age 36, was born in New Orleans and grew up in the Carrollton section, as she says, with a relatively normal childhood. (Writers are always looking for reasons why artists splash their guts across a canvas.) But even as a child, Deckbar drew and sketched people and models she had seen in newspapers and magazines.

From the beginning, the human figure has been the central focus of her work even though she came along at a time when "Pop" and "Funk" were sensationalizing the upbeat galleries and art schools. Cutting through much of modern art, Deckbar pays tribute to the 16th-century Italian Baroque master Caravaggio, his reverence to the human form and classical compositions. It is also something she stuck with all through her college training at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (USL) in Lafayette, San Francisco State University and



Adrian Deckbar's "Jeanne II, Grown Up Wrong" from 1985.

# MAN'S BEST FRIENDS

His dog, certainly.

And then perhaps the old tweed jacket and that favored pair of well-worn jeans.

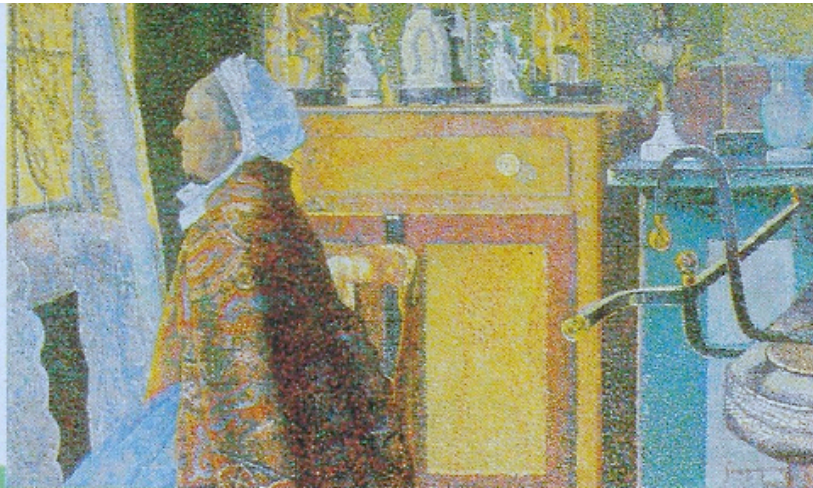
Mere items of clothing to the casual beholder, they are friends indeed to the man to whom they've faithfully clung in times of joy as in times of adversity.

Of course, even they were new once. So it well may be that *new* man's best friends await you at Friends right now. And, as for putting on the dog . . .



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George Morren's "Sunday Afternoon" (1892) appeared in the Neo-Impressionism exhibition at NOMA.

Tulane (where she now teaches painting and drawing).

"I started out being interested in classical art, Renaissance art, but I wanted it to be contemporary. I got involved in some concepts of Pop art in college, but I wanted more than just the surface look of Pop art. I wanted to go deeper than that. I wanted it to be more personal and psychologically penetrating. So I look for models that can really get into the subject. It's almost like acting."

To create the desired mood for her paintings, Deckbar hires professional models to act out and hold the story line while she photographs them on 35-millimeter color slides. The image is then projected on a prepared canvas and outlined. From that point, she adds the paints and colors to complete the visual image. Although artists have been using the camera for almost a century, Deckbar says some of her professional colleagues turn up their artistic noses at the way she uses photography in her work.

She jumps to her own defense: "I like the perfectness of it. I make the decisions when I'm behind the lens, and that's just as valid as it is to draw it out from a model sitting there."

Deckbar resents being called a photo-realist. "The absolute photo-realist goes for deadpan; there's no emotion. They try to capture things in mundane situations as they exist every day. Maybe they glamorize reflection or light, but it's more abstract. There's no narrative; there's no emotion. I think there should be more compelling emotion that draws the viewer in, and I purposely put things out of focus on the outer edges of my paintings. I want to draw the viewer to the person. Eye contact and expressions are more important than every square inch being treated with the same concern, which is the goal of true photo-realists.

"Even though I do use photography

as a tool, I consider it as part of one of the many mediums I need to make an image. I click the picture just like someone might sketch a sketch. And I don't feel that it's the ultimate end. Just capturing someone on the street is just photography, but setting someone up is the same as the classical painter did in the 1800s. . . . Some people say they have a problem with that. I don't."

Over the years, Deckbar has used mostly women to create visual moods she tries to portray. Occasionally, men or a second woman will enter the scene only to yield the stage to a single woman in the next series of paintings. Like contorted images in a carnival fun house hall of mirrors, much of her work has been autobiographical, "in a way . . . to portray moods or things" about herself. What you see is not necessarily what's there. She obviously wasn't one of what Deckbar terms her "sleazy broads" in the 1980 *Girls* show or one of the abused victims in her 1979 *Kidnapped* series. These were not actual events in her life, but they did represent psychological highs and lows in her own experience.

The *Kidnapped* show, influenced by the Patty Hearst kidnapping, resulted indirectly from the death of Deckbar's mother the year before. Reluctantly, Deckbar returned to New Orleans to help her father. "With the death and change, I didn't really want to move back here. I really felt trapped. I didn't think anything was going on artwise in New Orleans for me." But things began to happen for her almost immediately. She met gallery owner Arthur Roger, who represented her locally until this past November, and she signed up for the master of fine arts program at Tulane. Also the Contemporary Arts Center was "doing good things," she adds.

"I finally got back to being in New Orleans. My friends were here, grew up

here, went out to Tipitina's at night. I just started having fun." The result was *Girls*. Looking back, she says the *Girls* series was a break from the heaviness of the *Kidnapped* paintings. "*Girls* was fun and lighthearted." The 1985 show *Scenes* reflected another change in her life. Each showed a woman waiting or wanting something, or simply in a state of limbo. "There were major changes going on in my life—moving, changing relationships."

New Orleans has been good to her, both financially and artistically. During the past seven years, she has sold more than 70 paintings and has participated

in a number of individual and group shows. The *Big Easy* has and continues to influence Deckbar's work. Who could resist? New Orleans is like an old painted lady, heavy on the rouge and powder. She charms you with her wicked stories and innuendos while serving up smooth blended bourbon in old chipped teacups. And that's what is happening in much of Deckbar's paintings. Deckbar explains: "There's an element of decadence in my work, and that's New Orleans. The first show I did in San Francisco, *B-Movies*, was very decadent. People who knew I was from New Orleans said, 'Oh, that's Southern decadence.' And the *Girls*,

there's definitely some kind of underlying thing."

Deckbar has been quite successful in selling her paintings to private collectors. But corporate collectors present a different problem. According to New Orleans gallery owner Arthur Roger, the corporate world hasn't figured out what to do with her work yet. "With the *Kidnapped* show," he says, "people felt that she was a great artist, but they wanted her to do something easier to live with. I think that she has always been concerned and standoffish to doing work that would be too easy to live with because of the nature of working in realism. You really feel like you're catching something—a frozen moment."

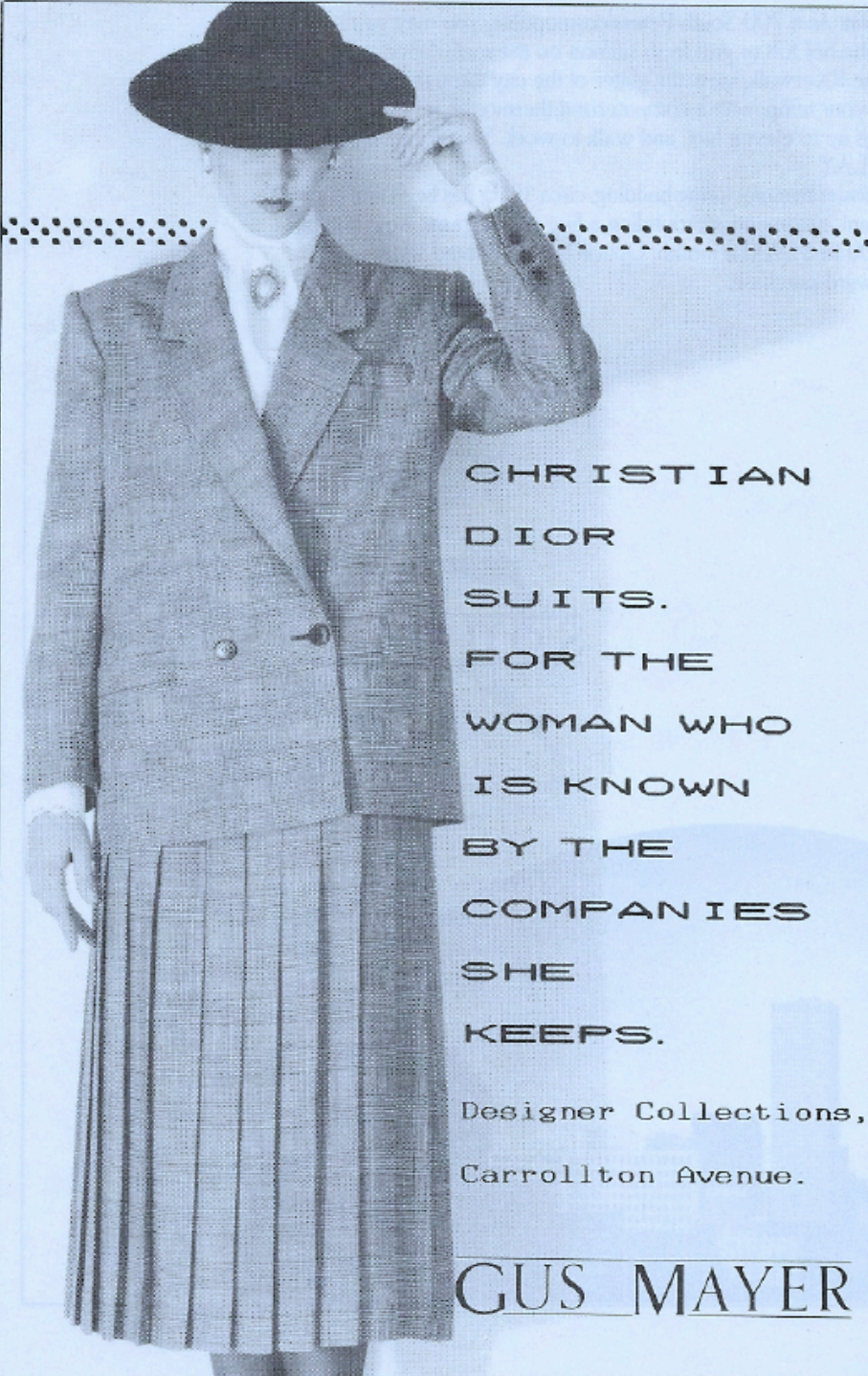
"Her works are very sensational and very extroverted in a positive way. They seem to have a large social commentary as well."

Regina Nelms, associate director of Hanson Gallery in New Orleans, and former public relations director of the Contemporary Arts Center, also has much to say about Deckbar. "We're really excited about Adrian's coming on board. I know her and have followed her work for years. She deals in a style of representational work that our clientele looks for. They will enjoy it."

Deckbar likes the New Orleans art scene. In fact, she says it has more sophisticated offerings than Houston, Dallas or Atlanta and stacks up with the best New York has to offer. "I've been checking the art market to see what could be available to me, and I think New Orleans is very competitive—good galleries, good art, good schools."

Although New Orleans is good, artists have to reach the bigger markets in New York, San Francisco, Dallas, Los Angeles and Atlanta if they are going to get any kind of national attention. Deckbar is getting there fast. In December, she signed on with San Francisco-based Hanson Galleries, which will show her work in New Orleans, a soon-to-open gallery in New York and their four locations in California, including San Francisco and Los Angeles. Hanson is also planning to do a series of prints or serigraphs that should boost her exposure even more.

Not surprisingly, Deckbar has very definite opinions about her work and other contemporary artists. "I have a hard time looking at a lot of artwork because it looks so frivolous. It seems so distant from the personal. It's just out there," she says, waving her arm and gesturing out the window. "They make these things that are their trademark. I really like artwork that is from the gut. I really like Francis Bacon's work—it's



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from the soul. I love Degas, though it's distant and cold. There's detachment but a connection too. There are a lot of current artists that leave me cold. It's like they have reached a certain level of professionalism in their work that is salable, and they repeat it. I hope never to do that.

"I just hope to go deeper and deeper. There are so many levels to human beings. To use what I know about that to make an interesting work is compelling. Sometimes my work is silly and fun, but I just hope to say something about the human condition."

## Neo-Impressionism Exhibit

In 1986, the New Orleans Museum of Modern Art (NOMA) celebrated its 75th anniversary with a litany of events and impressive art shows that will be remembered for a long time to come. NOMA actually celebrated two birthdays—its own and also the 100th anniversary of the 19th-century art movement known as Neo-Impressionism. *The Aura of Neo-Impressionism*, which opened in November and closed January 4, is the most important collection of Neo-Impressionist paintings ever to visit New Orleans. It was underwritten locally by Citicorp Private Banking and Investment.

Unfortunately, New Orleans was not on the circuit for the well-publicized French or Russian Impressionists exhibitions that toured the country in 1986, but the city was, indeed, lucky to be on the Indianapolis Museum of Art's three-stop national tour of the W.J. Holliday Collection of Neo-Impressionist paintings. (The late W.J. Holliday was a wealthy Indiana industrialist, who was enraptured by the work of 19th-century French painter Georges Seurat, the father of Neo-Impressionism.) NOMA supplemented the exhibit with paintings from other local and national collections to help celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first Neo-Impressionist exhibition held in Paris in 1886.

The museum's version of the show contained 52 paintings from the Holliday collection and almost a dozen more gathered by the museum from private collections in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, as well as from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Guggenheim in New York, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, the Flint Institute of Arts and the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts. The lineup of artists is impressive: Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, Camille and

Lucien Pissarro, Theo van Rysselberghe, Henry van de Velde. The show was accompanied by a 214-page catalogue, complete with color plates, that gives a scholarly and quite readable history of this important period in Western art.

History has given a prominent place to the Neo-Impressionists and their influence on 20th-century art movements. They, along with their predecessors, the Impressionists, broke the artistic fetters that eventually led the way for Cubism, Expressionism and other 20th-century art movements.

Although direct descendants of the Impressionists, the Neo-Impressionists differed in major ways. According to Ellen Lee, the Indianapolis Museum of Art curator who wrote the historical essay for the exhibition catalogue, Impressionists were committed to "recording the fleeting sensations of nature." The Neo-Impressionists, led by Seurat, were interested in the science and physics of color and natural light. They experimented with colors to see how they visually reacted with each other. "As the Neo-Impressionists chased the elusive effects of natural light, they also sought vivid color combinations of special intensity and brilliance," says Lee. They often painted pure and unmixed colors side by side in a pattern of small dots or splotches to create the illusion of a third color when seen at a distance; their technique was often referred to as Pointillism. In the same way, they used the chemistry of color to create brilliant visual effects by juxtaposing colors that were opposite from each other on the color wheel.

Their experiments and innovations often produced visually exciting, if not surreal, results. For instance, Van de Velde's "Pere Biart Reading in the Garden" shows a comfortably dressed man relaxing in a garden reading a magazine. It sounds straight away, but it's not. The paint is applied in various colors in small dots. The stippled brush strokes give the visual impression that you are watching the man through a raindrop covered window pane. The colorful components of light are isolated, intensified and drawn together to create the image.

When the first Neo-Impressionist show opened in Paris in 1886, it left critics and viewers alike scratching their heads, wondering what it was all about—a reaction that persists among some even today. ●

*John Kemp is art columnist for New Orleans Magazine and author of the recently published book Lewis Hine: Photographs of Child Labor in the New South.*



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