Tim Lowly

Gwenda Jay Gallery
301 W. Superior St., 312/664-3406

The cynicism and distrust of today's Postmodern social milieu haven't discouraged Tim Lowly, whose tempera and mixed-media paintings are eloquent expressions of the love and unity made possible through shared spiritual faith. By combining pre-Renaissance iconography with present-day imagery, Lowly, a new Chicago resident, formerly of Grand Rapids, Michigan, plugs us into the historic past while raising a much-needed contemporary dialogue about individual and global harmony. The only thing missing—hallelujah—is the Falwellian, finger-pointing didacticism common to much religiously-motivated art.

Most of the 17 pieces in this well-arranged show are quiet works of moderate size, meticulously and sensitively brushed onto Masonite panels. The tempera medium, with its delicate texture and technical significance as one of the oldest painting methods to dominate early, Biblically-concerned Western art, is especially apropos to this artist's spiritual interests.

A sense of profound internal struggle in coming to terms with personal tragedy is conveyed by several of Lowly's works. *Day to Day*, depicts a child with large, gentle eyes gazing out of a blue and gold leaf background while adult hands caress her neck. As we begin to notice and wonder at a small, flesh-colored shape near the child's collar-bone, an unhappy tale of illness suggests itself, and the eyes seem to grow sad. These calm yet dolorous eyes appear in many of the artist's images as do hands raised in gestures of supplication. *In Shrine of the Heart (Connie)*, a woman's hands and eyes beseech us, while a sterile suburban neighborhood fills the distance behind her. There seems little doubt as to the suffering of these individuals, but their sense of stoic strength, as indicated by the straightforward painting style and direct eye contact with the viewer, is a testament to the importance of faith in the artist's daily life.

While the passive acceptance of Lowly's more personally-motivated works may be troubling to our "do something" mentality, in paintings addressing gender and race relations, spiritualism plays a more dynamic part. Due to its large scale and powerful "h-shaped" construction, ***Heaven's Gate*** is the most vigorous piece in the show. In the life-size panel on the left stands a man looking intently over his shoulder, while a woman, also with an intense gaze, dominates the panel on the right. At the feet of each lays a broken object, symbolizing personal and social disillusionment. Both figures are painted in shades of gray, but the small center panel, in which a Native American woman seated in a grassy enclosure holds a few of the blades in her up-raised hands, is rendered in full color, indicating the richness of life experienced through a transcendental vision. While ***Heaven's Gate*** employs strong altar-piece construction to advocate sexual and cultural unity, the real success of this piece rests in the relative arrangement of its content, which allows individuals and social groups to maintain their particular identities, while striving to achieve personal and social harmony.

Many artists working today are involved in sociopolitical critique, and there is certainly a need for it. But in the quest to point out the negative, we may often lose sight of the need for a personal and cultural vision. Racial and cultural conflicts around the world must be addressed in a positive manner, both within the art community and beyond it. In this regard, Tim Lowly's work is refreshingly optimistic, for it tackles the dilemma of how to improve the human situation, rather than concentrating on the less challenging role of self-appointed accusor.

Lynda Barckert