

ART

People as Paint in Shirley Gorelick's Works

By HELEN A. HARRISON

STONY BROOK

As a figurative artist struggling to develop a personal mode of expression in an atmosphere dominated by Abstract Expressionism, Shirley Gorelick, an artist who lives in Great Neck, rejected both the extremes of nonobjectivity and photographic exactitude.

"I was trying to find a pictorial equivalent for reality as I saw it without becoming academic in style," she said. Her approach to this challenge is illustrated in a one-woman exhibition at the Art Gallery of the State University at Stony Brook.

For Mrs. Gorelick, who studied with Hans Hofmann and was active in the art worlds of New York and Provincetown, Mass., her move to Great Neck in 1956 was "very important," she said. "There were many other artists here then," she went on, "and the atmosphere was very stimulating. Even after living in the city, it was a turn-on."

Local classes, discussions and critiques helped her chart her esthetic course, but it was not until the mid-1960's that she began to refine the realist vocabulary for which she is now known.

Her current show is limited to a selection of paintings from the last seven years, during which time Mrs. Gorelick's technique and imagery have undergone several subtle adjustments while remaining within the framework of painterly figuration. Unlike those of the so-called "super-realist" school who use airbrush and other nontextural

techniques to create a slick surface effect, Mrs. Gorelick emphasizes the gesture as a method of paint application.

"I have never lost interest in the brushstroke," she said. "I have been influenced by gestural painting, but I'm always seeking an alternative way of dealing with the three-dimensional quality of the figure."

The show strongly emphasizes the element of confrontation in Mrs. Gorelick's work through the inclusion of severely frontal portraits and figure studies of monumental dimensions. At a distance, the uncompromising stares of the subjects are made all the more penetrating by what appears to be their rigid naturalism. On approaching the canvases, however, one reaches a point at which the images fragment into their component brush strokes and reveal themselves as paint, not people. As did the Impressionists, Mrs. Gorelick asks us to use our own perceptions to organize two-dimensional pictorial information into the palpable volumes and voids of an illusionistic mode.

The pose and its psychological effect on the viewer is also an essential concern for this artist. In "Chess Players," from a series created in 1971-1972, the figures are casually arranged and detached from the viewer. This detachment is maintained in "Double Libby" of 1972, in which the same model is portrayed twice on one canvas.

In the later works, however, the subjects confront the audience directly and often seem rooted in their settings, just as they rivet the onlooker with their merciless scrutiny. Their solemn

demeanor symbolizes the seriousness with which Mrs. Gorelick attacks her difficult task of combining sympathetic portraiture with exciting plastic organization.

Many of her compositions are highly complex and alive with color and pattern. Three canvases of sisters, embedded in a riot of garden foliage, reach the saturation point in their preoccupation with detail; yet, in their overall patterning and artificially flattened space, they approach abstraction. This feeling is most intense in "Three Sisters IV," in which each woman is seen twice and where the figures appear to be forced against the plane of the canvas by a veritable wall of pachysandra. However, reality is reasserted through volumetric treatment of the human form.

Among the most evocative of the works on view is "Willie, Billy Joe and Leroy," a portrait of three visitors to the artist's studio. They are seen posed before another of Mrs. Gorelick's canvases, "Family II," the original of which hangs nearby. The artist noted that it was necessary to simplify and tone down the backdrop version of "Family II" to prevent its strong portrait images from competing for attention with the three standing figures, who seem trapped in the shallow space between two surfaces of canvas. Here, perhaps more than in any of the other works, we have an insight into the feelings and attitudes of the subjects. They are the least confident in their roles as the painter's raw material, and are the only ones who seem to occupy their space with reluctance.

Although Mrs. Gorelick aims at capturing psychological insights, her pictorial effects often create barriers between subject and viewer. Jarring colors, dramatic lighting and preoccupation with pattern and texture in paint application mitigate against our perception of these portraits as people. In the most recent canvases, however, a lighter palette and the elimination of the linear edges that define her earlier figures contribute to a more sympathetic atmosphere.

The evident references to photographic imagery are occasionally disconcerting, as in "Sid and Lisa," where Sid's clasped hands are enlarged disproportionately by wide-angle-lens vision. Yet none of the paintings have been directly copied from photographs.

Mrs. Gorelick continues to work in the series format, creating variations on themes such as family groups and figures in interior settings.

"I have so many ways to say something that I feel one painting generally doesn't say enough," she said. "In my new work, I'm trying to achieve the same emotional intensity in profiles as there is in the frontal portraits. It's a challenge."

"I'm also introducing more complexity into the compositions," she added, "but when other elements compete with the heads for attention, you run the risk of minimizing the personalities. It's not easy to find the right balance."

"Shirley Gorelick: Paintings From 1971-78," will remain on view at the Art Gallery at the Fine Arts Building, State University at Stony Brook, through



Daniel E. Quat

'Willie, Billy Joe and Leroy,' by Shirley Gorelick

Feb. 21. The artist will discuss her work in the gallery on Thursday at 12:15 P.M. The gallery is open Monday through Fridays from 12 to 5

P.M., and Wednesday and Friday evenings from 7:30 to 11 P.M. Admission is free, but donations to defray production costs are welcome.