



Paul LaMantia, *Unused Portion*, 1980, oil on canvas, 66" x 79 1/2"

## Chicago

### PAUL LAMANTIA, Hyde Park Art Center:

Paul LaMantia is probably the most ignored and underrated artist working the Chicago Imagist tradition. The reason for this may be his use of violent sexual imagery combined with figures that appear to be part human, part insect or reptile, and part machine. His paintings are intimidating and monstrous in both size and subject matter, and the degree to which many people seem to have gone out of their way to avoid confronting LaMantia's art is an indication how effective it is.

To say that LaMantia is a misunderstood artist would be incorrect. He is perhaps understood all too well – at least in the brief time viewers allow themselves to experience his work before quickly moving away. This is in part due to the psychic taboos surrounding his horrific depictions of mindless, predatory carnality. Many of LaMantia's figures are feminine or hermaphroditic; it's easy to see

why, among feminists, he is not the most popular artist working today.

LaMantia's figures look like a radioactive fusion of Richard Lindner's vamps, with bullet-shaped breasts and garter-belted pantyhose, with imagery from the writing of H.P. Lovecraft. A mutant strangeness not only transforms heads into melon shapes and skin into scales, but sends the whole scene careening headlong into patterned abstraction. Contorted, aberrant beings sport flayed or filigreed flesh, free-floating eyes, and fangs. So much detail is packed into the paintings that it's often difficult to read what unspeakable acts are taking place in LaMantia's out-of-place suburban livingrooms. Humanoid and nonhuman forms seem to have been surrealistically slaughtered and then re-grafted together.

Despite everything, there is a courage and beauty in LaMantia's work. It is high time that he take his place among the best of Chicago's dard visionaries, from Ivan Albright to Ed Paschke, who seek to expose the nightmare side of humanity's psyche and make it somehow palatable.

-MICHAEL BONESTEEL