

The Herald

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LaMantia works make socko show

by Cara Glatt

The art of Paul LaMantia, currently on exhibit at the Hyde Park Art Center, is of such an insistent nature as to immediately envelop the viewer. There is an overall carnival atmosphere about these large-scale works that is due in large measure to the artist's extravagant use of color.

The exhibition, "Paul LaMantia: a Review 1967-1982" displays paintings and drawings of this Chicago artist, whose works were first seen at the Art Center in the 1960s. Since then, LaMantia has shown at important museums including the Art Institute and the Museum of Contemporary Art, and most recently at the Smart Gallery's "Alumni Who Collect" exhibit. His works are owned by some of Chicago's major collectors and also by such well-known Chicago artists as Virginio Ferrari and Roger Brown.

LaMantia is mild-mannered man in person, but his work is far from mild. Horrifying images are the mainstay of his art. At the opening, the artist did not care to comment on his work but was full of praise for HPAC: "I have a great affection for the Art Center. Don Baum and Ruth Horwich gave me my first opportunity here. This is an institution that solidly supports Chicago art."

Meanwhile, viewers at the opening were eager to express their opinions of LaMantia's audacious works. Attesting to the power of the art was the fact that people were provoked to speak out so readily about it. Among the adjectives heard were "noisy, screaming, spectacular, violent, garish, fabulous, hypnotic, and ripsnorting."

There is no doubt that the forcefulness of LaMantia's work is easily conveyed to his audience. His crowded spaces, pulsating with erotic energy, project a feeling of ominous excitement. The wealth of shapes, patterns and colors, all segments of LaMantia's highly individual visual ideas, impart a tumultuousness to the works. There is a lot going on in these paintings.

LaMantia's repertoire of images includes eyes, claws, skulls, lacings, shoes, insects and ladies' undergarments. Such everyday objects as TV sets, ash trays and telephones are also part of LaMantia's scene. His Dolly Parton-shaped female forms have fabric-like patterned legs. Other shapes are leafy, pod-like, and phallic or rocket forms, all coexisting nicely in the same painting.

Color is a compelling element of LaMantia's work. He uses brilliant hues of blue, green and red, as well as all the gradations between. His colors are visceral yet joyous, creating a disjunction with the subject matter, which instead of being cheery, has a nightmare quality to it. Heavy black outlining adds to the rhythm of the works.

"Cancellation" (1974-75) is a formal arrangement of a male figure with pod-like legs seated on a red chair, with a coffee cup and pill bottles on the table. Rocket shapes adorn his head. A reclining female's red leg patterns suggest veins. Other female forms are also discernible in this myriad of curvilinear shapes punctuated with a few, almost unnoticed straight lines.

As Dennis Adrian states in his insightful catalog essay,



The Dark Side of the Mirror (1977) by Paul LaMantia

"It is not always possible to tell whether one is seeing a fantastic and frightening vision of flayed and corrupt flesh or whether the figures wear bizarre sheaths and skintight clothes which present alarming and unpleasant textures."

LaMantia's playfulness is evident in *The Pump Room* (1977) which has a cocktail glass and a torso with a pump-like appendage attached to it. In *Ten to One* (1971-72), a small clock with hands pointing to the time of the title is almost hidden by the grasshopper-infested humanoid forms. A small untitled sculpture bird rests on thick soup-bone thighs while real chicken bones stick out of his head.

One of the artist's newer pieces, an oil entitled *Mad Dog* (1981), is a departure from the older works. Now the surface is not altogether covered. Heavily applied paint is used, and the girl and dog are completely recognizable. The direction of this new painting was not as exciting as the style of past works.

Space does not permit more than a mention of the many fine drawings in the show. Two of my favorites were *Sounds* (1981), a comic-strip kind of work sprinkled with tuning forks, and *No. 4 Untitled* (1968), an atypical work in that it projected a light Matisse-like quality.

This is a socko show: it should not be missed. Allow extra time to sort out the multitude of LaMantia's images in each of the works.

The exhibit, presented in cooperation with the Zaks Gallery, runs through Nov. 6. Hours are Tuesday-Saturday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Hyde Park Art Center, 1701 E. 53rd St.