

Imaginary Cityscapes

*Brodsky and Utkin
at San Diego State*

BY JUDITH CHRISTENSEN

The paintings of Edward Hopper evoke a strong sense of the American city, small town and countryside of the era in which they were produced. Other painters, for example John Nava or David Ligare, utilize indicators from the classical era—columns, mythological references and so on—in a contemporary format. Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin produce work that is tied to the past in terms of presentation, rooted in present-day issues and futuristic in vision.

Many of their etchings, at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art and the San Diego State University Art Gallery, were created in response to competitions sponsored by Japanese architectural publications. Although architects by training, they proposed solutions that are conceptual. The designs

are not intended to be built; rather, they respond to issues.

In this respect their work is similar to that of Helen and Newton Harrison. Both teams investigate the habitability of our environment. And both teams combine visual imagery and text. Whereas the Harrisons' work is, for the most part, site-specific, Brodsky's and Utkin's is generalized. In fact, since the text is in English and they address problems existent in any urban center, I wasn't sure by just viewing the work whether they still lived in Moscow or had emigrated to New York. (The former is the case.)

Stageless Theater or Wandering Spectators' Hall is a variation on Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage..." The audience-platform moves through the city streets on a large, six-axle truck. "For those who know how to look, the life of the city is unpre-

dictable, a constantly changing, mysterious spectacle," explains the accompanying text. In *Columbarium Habitabile* a huge concrete structure divided into cubicles is constructed in the center of a large, modern city. This gives the inhabitants of the little, old houses, which would otherwise be demolished as they are not part of the city's general plan, a place to which they can move their home intact.

Although no city may ever fabricate the *Columbarium Habitabile* to preserve its old structures, parts of *Island of Stability* became a three-dimensional installation at the SDSU Art Gallery venue. A giant, plaster egg, almost touching the gallery's high ceiling, occupies the center of the floor. Behind it, on a shelf that runs the length of the rear wall, is a tableau, *After a Big Celebration*, made up of hundreds of cracked, plaster objects: bottles, monuments, heads, animals, stone-like shapes, and fragments of tablets. The strength of this piece stems not from its individual parts, as evidenced by four separate plaster figures, each on its own sculpture stand. Isolated like this, the pieces lack meaning. The work's impact derives from the context of the whole which, viewed from a distance, resembles a city skyline, one which overindulged the night before.

The two large-scale installations indicate that Brodsky and Utkin's three-dimensional work is equal to its two-dimensional precursors with which it shares many qualities. The allusions to the past include content as well as presentation. The etching paper is made to look old. The surface of the egg is cracked, scratched, marked, then rubbed with oil, paint and beeswax so it appears like an archeological remnant. Some of the objects in the tableau are unrecognizable fragments, like ceramic shards found on an archeological dig. Mythological references abound. The plaster figure that appears to be pushing the giant egg becomes an updated Myth of Sisyphus. Laocoön and his sons coiled in serpents appear in *A Contemporary Architectural Art Museum* and Icarus flies through the atrium of *Villa Claustrophobia*. Brodsky and Utkin utilize columns, domes and other classical architectural elements again and again.

There is a sense of mapping in the cityscapes of the etchings that also extends to the three-dimensional work. The vertical buildings, tightly packed and almost growing out of one another as in *Wandering Turtle in a Maze of a Big City*, can also be read as a street map. The rows of

windows become footprints of buildings that line the streets as well as cars, outdoor cafe tables and flower boxes. Likewise, some of the blotches on the surface of the egg become countries, even continents and seas.

Brodsky and Utkin may postulate imaginary constructs, yet their ideas carry import for practical architecture. In *Villa Claustrophobia*, living quarters are stacked in tight proximity.

What exempts this from being just another high-rise apartment building is a magical atrium, glazed with one-way mir-

ror-glass that reflects the sky. Occupants look out onto it, but rather than see neighbors, they "see only endlessness." The artists' metaphorical allusions recognize human beings' need for light, a sense of space, mobility, privacy and so on, needs that modern architecture often ignores. And, say Brodsky and Utkin, the solutions are not unattainable; they may be hiding right behind us, encased within our own past. ■

Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin, through December 6 at San Diego State University Art Gallery, San Diego.



Brodsky and Utkin, *Villa Claustrophobia*, 1985, etching, 14" x 11", at San Diego