

Scenes Of Fleeting Reality

Schuchard's work in 'Currents' makes memories three dimensional

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IT IS SOMEWHAT disorienting to wander around in the big, bright loft where Patrick Schuchard works. You might be tempted to straighten that rumpled rug on the floor or to sit down in the worn but comfy-looking armchair or to drop a notebook on the skirted table or, on a chilly day, to stand in front of a big ventilator cover in the wall.

But don't straighten, sit, set or expect to warm your backside. All of the objects mentioned are art, and their tricks to the eye last just a minute. Then the realness evaporates into a sort of three-dimensional dream state. But these illusions, however fleeting, press themselves into your mind.

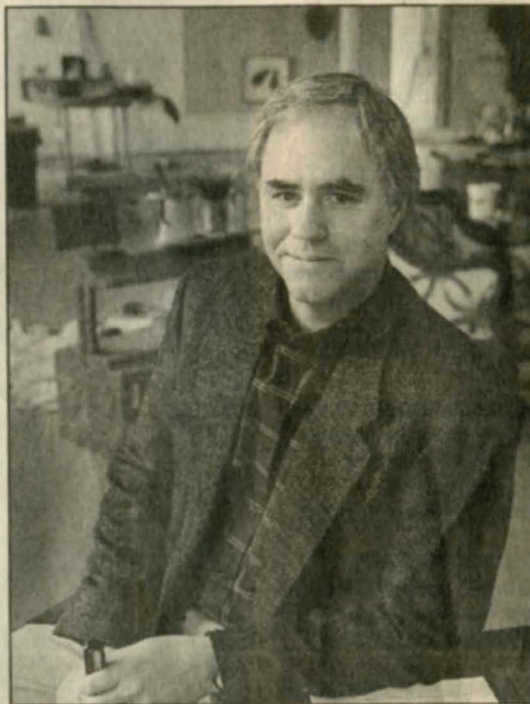
These and other objects that artist Pat Schuchard has created will be in what has promise of being a brilliant show opening this week at the St. Louis Art Museum. His work forms the 49th in a series of Currents Exhibitions, which are mounted to introduce new work by worthy artists to museum visitors.

Actually, for many collectors and exhibition-goers — indeed, for anyone who has occasion to pass the corner of Seventh and Locust streets downtown — Schuchard doesn't need an introduction.

His work has been shown in recent exhibitions and is in a number of collections here. In addition to the Art Museum show, Nussbaum McElwain Inc., Art Advisory Services, will exhibit a collection of work from 1975-91 beginning Feb. 7.

In the late 1980s, he was commissioned to paint *trompe l'oeil* architectural murals on the back of the 705 Olive Street building and on the east side of the old bank building on Locust Street now occupied by the Lashly Baer & Hamel law firm. Both are meticulously rendered, but more: Clever art-historical touches and asides in them engage the mind as well as the eye.

When I first met Pat Schuchard a dozen years ago, he was teaching school and working in a studio in the basement of his house just off Grand Boulevard near Tower Grove Park. He was painting still lifes in those days, and formally, anyway, these paintings were part of the grand still-life tradition.



Pat Schuchard in his studio.

But in another way, there was something a bit weird or disturbing about them. Rather than being the sort of order-bringing, beauty-discovering, soul-satisfying and eye-pleasing pictures of a painter such as Chardin or even William Bailey, Schuchard's still lifes had an ominous quality: sort of *nature morte*, literally, rather than still life. The arrangements of objects on tabletops seemed to make some sort of dark, autobiographical statement.

He kept working on this art, all the while teaching at a number of area schools — "I have been an academic gypsy," he says — and doing commissions.

The most public and visible commissions are

Pat Schuchard: Objects of Memory and Desire

Place: The St. Louis Art Museum, Gallery 337

Duration: Jan. 28-March 15

Hours: Tuesday, 1:30-8:30 p.m.; Wednesday-Sunday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; closed Monday

Selected Work 1975-1991

Place: Nussbaum McElwain Inc.

Address: 5595 Pershing Avenue

Hours: Tuesday-Friday, noon-5
Duration: Feb. 7-March 6

those downtown murals, as well as a 14-by-300-foot mural he produced for Oaklawn Park, the Hot Springs, Ark., horse track.

But he also makes accomplished portraits, portraits so good they please sitters and critics. I've always admired a group portrait of staff members of the Mark Twain Bank and recently came across another one I like, a portrait of the Red Cross board in the organization's headquarters on Lindell Boulevard.

Recently Schuchard showed me slides of a four-panel portrait he did of the late August A. Busch Jr. and his wife, Margaret Busch, which was presented to them as a wedding present by his son, Adolphus Busch IV and his wife, Ann. He did a portrait of novelist Stanley Elkin for Washington University, where it hangs in Olin Library.

All that, plus some illustrating, pays the bills these days. Two years ago, Schuchard gave up teaching when he felt academic life closing in on him. Nowadays his job is his art, full time. His workplace is a vast floor in one of those great light-industrial buildings on Locust Street, just west of the central business district.

The work has moved off the flat plane of the canvas. Although some paintings are part of what he is doing now, they are, in fact, works in three dimensions because what appears at first to be a frame is actually part of the whole arrangement of the work of art. Most of the work is made of felt and wax, then painted. An exception — and it is a big one

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— is a sculpture made of felt and clay.

The subject matter appears at first to be a little bit of this and a little bit of that, but what informs — indeed propels — all of it is this complex and curious and hard-to-explain notion of fleeting reality.

As I said, when you first look at this art, or when you see it out of the corner of your eye, it looks real. In a twinkling, that impression leaves you and you realize that you are looking at artifice. The intense artificiality of these things, however, makes them all the more striking and involving. It is as if they are memories made three dimensional.

What does he make? All sorts of things. Record-album covers, a baby grand piano, a table with a skirt on it that he calls the "volunteer" table because it is the kind of dressed-up, therefore artificial, table you find with volunteers behind them in malls or at conventions handing out things. He makes kitchen cabinets and wigs. "Have you ever seen a wig that looks real?" he asks. There's a torso of a priest dressed to perform a eucharist.

And — towering over all this — is a life-size model of Robert Wadlow, the so-called Alton Giant. When I first looked at it, I had the same response I had to the rug. Real. It is something about the posture, a body language that expresses diffidence and resignation. This is the piece made of clay, wearing a suit of felt.

I also had the feeling that everything is somehow autobiographical and Schuchard says, yes, there is that in the work, but it's rather tangential.

"It is biographical, but not in a literary sense. All of these things I've had some contact with, but I don't want to remake the past and I'm not interested in nostalgia.

"What I am interested in is interpreting the past through

these things. If you strip away all the stylistic tendencies and the subject matter you find a thread that runs through all these things — taking objects that exist in the world and putting them into the context of art."

Schuchard was born in St. Louis in 1951 and grew up here. He took his fine arts degree from Washington University in 1973. He spent a year in New York in a Whitney Museum of American Art program, then went to the University of Florida for his master's, which he received in 1975.

He taught at the University of Delaware for two years, then returned to St. Louis in 1977. Besides teaching in the architecture school at Washington University and at Fontbonne, he also worked for Fortune, the custom furniture-making company that former Mark Twain Banks chairman Adam Aronson created. Fortune put a number of talented artists to work and offered them some financial security while reaping the benefits of their skills. Schuchard praised collector-banker Aronson for his enthusiastic support of local artists.

Schuchard says he built his house, where he lives with his wife and two children, and used to renovate buildings and then sell them. Now that he is making three-dimensional forms, the desire to build or fix-up buildings is gone.

"Maybe I just wanted to make sculpture," he says.

Two years ago, he cut loose from academic life, "and I haven't regretted it." He earns enough from commissions and illustrating to have a nice life with his family, and to pay the rent on this big, bright loft, where he goes to work every day.

Schuchard looks at his visitor with his penetrating gaze and then off somewhere, perhaps into the land of memory and imagination. And then he looks around at the rug and the piano and the record covers, at the Alton Giant and the volunteer table, at the wigs, the ventilator cover and the chair.

And finally, he says, "I don't have to sell this stuff. And that is important."



Schuchard at work on his life-size sculpture of Robert Wadlow, who was known as the Alton Giant.