

REVIEW ART

Pat Schuchard's Works At New Blue Moon Gallery

By Patricia Degener

THE DOWNTOWN SCENE on a Saturday night in the loft area west of Tucker Boulevard would really surprise stay-at-home St. Louis. The dance clubs attract a large, youthful, late-late-night audience. And on a Saturday when the art galleries all have openings, the action starts earlier and the crowd is even more diversified.

It would be stretching a point to assume the majority of the droves of gallery-goers are art lovers, but the same could be said of the opening night crowds in Soho in lower Manhattan.

The vitality of the scene is prompted by entrepreneurial enterprise, a let's-do-it attitude typified by the opening last weekend of the Blue Moon Gallery, so called because it will only be open once in a blue moon.

Dan Vignati, owner of the building on the southwest corner of 15th Street and Washington Avenue, is a door maker whose woodworking shop occupies the ground floor. The second floor — cleaned up, painted, innovatively lighted — houses the new gallery, and what a fine space it is.

Similarly brilliant was the choice of the inaugural exhibition, which features the work of Pat Schuchard.

Schuchard hasn't had a show of his work in St. Louis in seven years, although from time to time one of his haunting still-life paintings has been included in a group show. He has been working steadily, however, and stories of his new work and use of new materials have drawn a number of artists to his studio. The wait was worth it. The exhibit is one of the most interesting and provocative shows in recent years.

Schuchard is a realist, and his choices of imagery are classic — the landscape and especially the still

Pat Schuchard: New work

Place: Blue Moon Gallery

Address: 1500 Washington Avenue

Duration: Through Dec. 1

Hours: By appointment, Monday-Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Telephone: 621-8544

life. His fascination lies in the object, its formal attributes (shape and color), its symbolic power and its energy.

To express a personal and certainly culturally contextual imagery through the depiction of chosen objects is, of course, what art is all about. The question is how, and Schuchard has spent a lot of time thinking about how.

Using a medium of thick industrial felt impregnated with wax, he has in the most literal sense released the object from the canvas, carving its likeness, isolating it, objectifying it, and in a paradoxical way making it at once more literal dimensionally but even more mysterious and ambiguous.

Take, for example, his wax and felt guitar in its case. To Schuchard (and he is not alone in this view), the guitar is an object of desire. It figures in his paintings. Its imagery in works of art has a formidable history. It is an allusion to the female form. But even if all these little bits of information contribute to our reaction to this particular depiction of a guitar, it is the object's palpability, its less-than-authentic scale, the wonderful seductiveness of its wax surface to our touch, its tenderness (certainly not an adjective associated with much contemporary art), its uniqueness that initially capture us.

Artists, Cezanne and Matisse just for example, collect certain objects that appear over and over

again in their work. Matisse denied that his choices of objects were to serve as either signs or symbols. They were simply formal choices.

But choice is choice. Art is based in many-leveled illusions. The object depicted in paint is not the object but an image physically and imaginatively mediated through the artist. Transformation, both meaning and sensory reaction, further occurs in the viewer's contemplating the painted image.

The importance to Schuchard of his images can be seen in a large still-life painting. The picture is low-key in color, and in it are a variety of everyday things portrayed in other works in the show, things like stacked wood, a furnace vent with a rug partly over it, a shield-shaped chair back, a guitar form. They are shown scattered on a wood floor and seen from above. The artist may be able to tell you what these particular items mean to him personally, but you don't have to know. As symbols they may remain ambiguous, but because these images are imbued with an authenticity of feeling, they are filled with the resonance of memory.

Schuchard has also objectified his landscapes, even a history painting ("Custer's Last Stand"), into objects made of his felt and wax, with frames, all of a piece. My particular favorite, dealing wittily with illusion, is tiny and full of dark mystery and is called "Antiquity." The image is taken from an El Greco painting of a view, I assume, of Toledo, with a figure in the foreground holding up to the viewer a map of the city. It is a wonderful conceit as well as being an object to covet.

From his wax impressions of record jackets to pedestrian furniture, Schuchard's works are depictions of the virtues of the daily, the ordinary. They are in no sense nostalgic. "This is my life," he said, waving his arm to embrace the gallery.