

photographs for his figural compositions, characterized by deep and frontal space with realistic artifacts placed throughout the composition, often of a figure seated in a room. It is in Bacon's work of 1953-1959 that the closer affinities exist: *Two Figures* (1953), *Battleship* (1957 — a study for the nurse in the film *Potemkin*), *Man with Dog* (1953) and *Chimpanzee* (1955) are characterized by a fluid application of paint, exaggerated gestures, thinly layered paint and an ambiguity as to time and place which are found in Hafftk'a's work as well.

Michael Hafftk'a's paintings possess qualities both in content and formal arrangement found in several master painters' work. The elements of pathos, marked by a great deal of eccentricity, fervor, and passion are underlying essences of Goya's and Soutine's art and are also important elements in Hafftk'a's paintings. Like Goya and Soutine he portrays a world of everyday, naked reality. His art, like theirs, depicts contemporary emotional states with notable verisimilitude. However, unlike Goya, Hafftk'a's art neither directly attempts social satire nor presents real events and political figures. However, he explores mankind's essential nature, sharing with other masters such as Dante, Rembrandt, Daumier, Beckett, Dostoevsky and Rouault an understanding of the precariousness of life and the threat of extinction.

The structural organization of Hafftk'a's paintings to some degree also is similar to Matisse's. In *Urban Piss* and *Hold On*, one finds rich color co-existing within a curious arrangement of figural form and formal space that is related to Matisse's reductive compositions. In Matisse's *The Piano Lesson*, the organization of the picture surface is achieved by a combination of transpositions and literal illusions. It is a clear definition and celebration of planes of color, and the reduction of pattern while presenting figural form. In Hafftk'a's paintings, the empty planes of space accent the foreground, and in the compositions, the formal elements are always secondary to the angst-ridden characters.

A profusion of buried voices appears to be released in these paintings by Hafftk'a. It is the artist's unconscious which plays a vital role in their creation. The overwhelming power in this work is as strident

as the cry of a trapped animal. Vice, hypocrisy, vanity, cruelty and violence are all mixed together in these visionary paintings which evoke the sense of the specific and the general. This art raises questions about Hafftk'a's perceptions of the world, and about our chaotic time.

A sizeable portion of Hafftk'a's paintings are portraits; there are two groups of these. One consists of images inspired by a real person, where an actual exchange between artist and individual has taken place, and the others are of imaginary characters. Both types display an eerie psychological anguish, and each contains mysterious objects and symbols relevant to the subject presented. Hafftk'a says that each type of portrait stems from his intuitive choices. In the case of the portraits of real sitters, he does not plan out the composition; when he begins to paint the person, he deals with the present moment, trying to present the essence of the person being painted. He feels that the final picture is a visual translation of the sitter's personality — his virtues, vices, fears and desires. For him all human beings are a conglomeration of contradictory states. Likeness is discounted; his people are essences of human form, often resembling shapes devoid of skeletal structure.

In this exhibition we have examples of each type of portrait. *Meltzer Meltzer & Meltzer* is a portrait of an actual man. A sad looking, slightly slouched male figure stands between a shut venetian blind and a large, haunting, grimacing mask. Hafftk'a's use of personal symbolism here leaves one wondering about this character who stands insecurely in a field of delicate blue and violet.

Rumpelstiltskin is one of Hafftk'a's imaginary portraits. Centrally positioned on the canvas, a man sits in an illusory garden. He is blocked from our vision by an irregular vertical bar which could be a tree or a pole. The tension in this image is accented by Hafftk'a's more assertive painterly technique. Giving this work a fairytale title stirs up allegorical references.

Hide and Seek does not purport to be a portrait of anyone. It is a beautiful synthesis of abstraction and frenzied expression. A crazed figure leaps from behind two black shields outlined in red. The energy exuded from this character appears to contain the

essence of the raw intensity found throughout Hafftka's work. Is this a self-portrait of the artist?

C.G. Jung has taught us that we all have a shadow side to our psyches and that we often project an extension of our inner selves. Given that all art is an extension of its creator, one can assume that perhaps Hafftka's portraits represent a curious amalgamation of his personal observations about man and about his personal self.

Part of the wonder of Michael Hafftka's art is that it raises questions and exists in the realm of the mysterious. Each time I return to one of his paintings, I find new things: more meaning lurks within the vitalized pigments, strongly asserting itself. Because of their multi-layered complexity, they are open to interpretation. Whatever the specific canvases may mean, Hafftka's volcanic landscapes of the mind possess those penetrating and essential ingredients required for greatness.

Elaine A. King
Director, Hewlett Gallery

All the quotes from Michael Hafftka came from an interview on September 16, 1984.