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Art Above the Fray
by Peter Plagens

Ron Linden doesn't exactly fit the profile of an unknown artist who labors in obscurity for years, is ignored by the art establishment and finds himself at "midcareer" bereft of dealers, patrons and critical champions. After all, back in 1978 the guy had a National Education Association individual artist's fellowship, and between 1978 and 1990, he had eight solo shows. Nevertheless, Linden does constitute, in my opinion, almost the living definition of the uncompromising, steadfast, talented, thoroughly modern painter who's gotten lost in the shuffle of the "hot" young postmodernist photographers, performers and installation artists who have dominated the scene over the last 20 years.

It's not that Linden should have bumped any of them off the stage; it's just that he should have had a little place in the limelight of an art world gone increasingly irony-wild, retrohappy and technocrazy. He's the kind of grizzled, gritty, persevering, but also deceptively poetic, artist to whom few people in the art audience (especially those looking for either a quick graphic hit or pretentious allusions to deep theory) want to pay attention. His large, solid body of work is, if not exactly a treasure undiscovered, at least an achievement semi-ignored.

Perhaps his work is too difficult for the no-brainer labels (neoconceptualism, patheticism, appropriation art, etc) that the quick-time art world likes so much these days. His flirting-with-monochrome paintings, rendered in simple materials like graphite and acrylic paint, are both abstract and not: Linden "corrupts" his abstraction with words, diagrams and illusions of perspective. He's been compared in print with both Richard Diebenkorn and Bruce Nauman, and the critics were right: Linden operates out of the delightfully astute wrongheadedness of Nauman's assemblage sculptures but with some of the deft touch of Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" pictures. He also employs politically allusive titles (Facade of Legitimization, for example) too explicit for formalist tastes but accompanied by imagery too hermetic for activists' appetites. "My wish is to make each painting tougher than the last," he says over the phone from California, "full of minute surprises, but engaging enough on first look to keep viewers hanging around so that they'll be rewarded by the subtext on the second or third read."

At 56, the tautly muscled, close-cropped Linden still works a strenuous day job as a union scenic artist in southern California's movie and television studios. He often commutes 100 miles a day on his BMW motorcycle. Linden lives in an unglamorous, but wonderfully functional, tiny stucco house in the fishing-and-oil port of San Pedro and paints in a birdlike studio in the backyard. Married, with a raft of adult stepchildren

as well as two grown sons of his own, Linden is an artist down to his toes. But things haven't always gone the way he would have liked.

"I had my first solo, at age 39, at a downtown L.A. gallery when downtown was going to be big," he says. "Then I was with a now-defunct gallery for 10 years. The work was all right; it was getting reviewed – in the national magazines a couple of times. I thought things would move right along."

They didn't. "I naively thought the artist's job was just to do the work," he explains. "I didn't think I had to promote the art too. When I started working in the movies, I saw what the schmooze was all about. For whatever reason, I just don't make it with those kinds of people... I suppose it's because the people who are my heroes are outsiders. What I read is that way too: Charles Olson, Samuel Beckett and, over the last few years, the antirationalists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. All of them say in effect that the paramount duty of an individual is to remain in a minority. I worry that with certain parts of the art world that if I got in there with 'em and had a couple of gins, I could learn to like it and fall in line. So I stay out of the mix."

Linden has never been the kind of guy who's at home on the collectors' garden-party circuit. As he tells it: "My father, a civil engineer, took the Illinois Central to work in the Chicago Loop. We didn't even have a used car until I was 12. I went to a kind of tough, working-class high school, but I got a good education, though I resisted it." He did get into the University of Illinois, however, where he studied architecture for two years before switching to art. After receiving a master's degree in art in 1966, he quickly got a teaching job at Bradley University in Peoria. But he gave up tenure in 1972. "I came out to the College Art Association annual meeting in San Francisco in February and wound up scoring a summer gig at the University of Southern California, in L.A. I kind of knew I wasn't coming back to Peoria. I packed up a trailer with a compressor and spray gun, a bolt of canvas and my Harley-Davidson."

Linden, with two young sons in tow, needed employment when that summer ended. He took his "ridiculously abstract" portfolio to the scenic painters union and, to his surprise, found work. "For a while I made good money at CBS, and from time to time I got teaching gigs." Like many artists, Linden found himself at the mercy of low-end industrial landlords. After a couple of wonderfully cavernous lofts were sold out from under him, he discovered San Pedro. "I moved there in '91," he says, "never imagining I could live such a rich, physical life for so little."

A rich life in a Saroyanesque sense, yes, but Linden hasn't had a solo show since 1989. Still, he's been involved in the L.A. scene, although not the more moneyed West Hollywood-Santa Monica part of it. Last year, Linden helped start the Big Sail gallery adjacent to Al's Bar downtown, which showed some of his favorite work by other people – work that's usually a little crusty, like his. The gallery lost its space this year, and

Linden and a friend are still looking for another building. When I visited him last summer he had a whole studio full of new work and sketches and diagrams for new pieces festooning the walls. And he's still reading. "I read different stuff than I did when I was a graduate student or when I was 30, but I still get that same tingle when I come across something really good, and eccentric. From James Joyce and John Cage I know how liberating silence can be; I've always been relaxed if I thought I hit an artist's block because I've made lots of scraps. If I just let 'em hang around the studio, they can turn into something.... When I do a teaching gig, students sometimes look at me like I'm crazy when I say if you just stay engaged in the studio you'll kind of go on autopilot. Cézanne said that if you allowed your work to be interrupted by your own thoughts, you'd screw it up."

Near the end of our phone conversation, Linden becomes a bit concerned that he sounds like he's whining. "I don't have any qualms about the way I've lived or what I did," he says. Then he does grouse for a few minutes about his latest day job. "The last couple of weeks, I've been working on the sets for this teen program, allegedly taking place in a high school. But it has zero poignancy, no hip-hop, no depth and no send-ups of anything. It just cynically targets an audience of pre-high schoolers." He says he might try to reestablish contact with a gallery that put one of his works in the 1993 edition of the late, lamented L.A. Art Fair. "But [the dealer] started showing car bumpers with decals of bad poetry," Linden says. "I like the guy, but he's in the business." Then he collects himself and vows, I'm going to power myself out of my reclusiveness. But at my age, I'm not going to have anybody [promote my paintings] for me. If I have to be polite, I'll be polite." And finally, a note of realization of what he's up against, with twenty-something creators of spectacular video projections and giant Cibachrome photographs of sexual exotica pouring out of the hip art schools in droves: "Even if my work isn't out there on a level for mass consumption, it's still a record of what I thought and felt and did."

Nearly everybody leaves behind a record of this sort. In Linden's case, however, it happens that what he thought and felt and did in the studio was – if never quite in step with the kind of momentary fashion that seems to put a new "generation" of L.A. artists on the board every 18 months – quite good all along. If only he could have had one of those gigs, schmoozed and stayed in the mix. Then again, probably better for his art that he didn't.