

THRESHOLDS
VIEWING
CULTURE





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viewing culture

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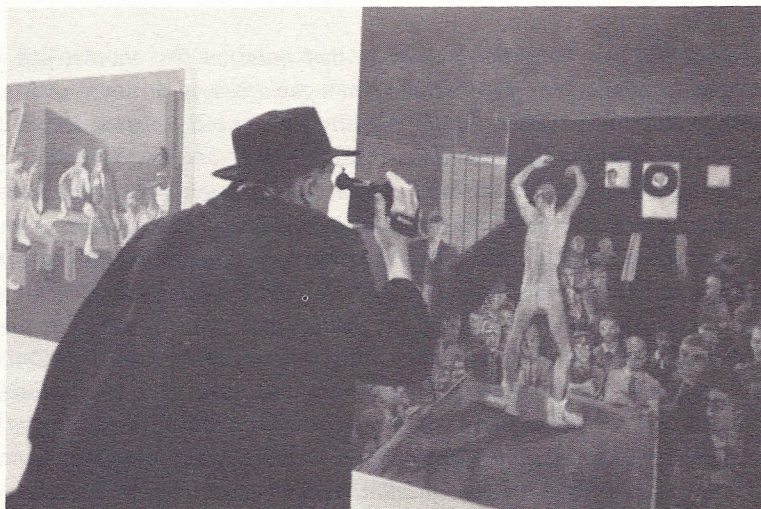
THRESHOLDS was established to promote dialogue within the academic community and to publish non-technical and provocative papers of inter-disciplinary interest.

THRESHOLDS Criteria for Submissions: All papers, essays, etc. must be understandable to educated people in any discipline. Technical terms should be avoided. Where terms are necessary, they must be clearly defined within the text. Footnotes, if used, should be kept to a minimum. Submissions can be anywhere from one to twenty pages in length. Authors are requested to submit a double-spaced, hard copy of their article by January 1 for inclusion in the Spring Edition. Editors will request an electronic version of accepted manuscripts. For further information please contact *THRESHOLDS: viewing culture*, c/o GSA, 1409 South Hall, University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA 93106. (805) 893-7042.



Patrick Angus
1952 - 1992

This issue of *Thresholds: viewing culture*
is dedicated to the memory of Patrick Angus
and unnamed others who have died of AIDS.

Re: Views**The Paintings of Patrick Angus**

Gary Brown
 Department of Art
 University of California, Santa Barbara

Steve North
 Santa Barbara Yoga Center

William Stern (in italics)
 Department of Art History
 University of California, Santa Barbara

The cover article for this issue of Thresholds: viewing culture was begun in homage to a living painter—a way of telling him that someone is looking at and listening to his paintings. Instead, this article is being written in memorium: Patrick Angus died on May 14, 1992. This article was planned as a way of telling the public to take notice of a great painter in their midst, now no longer. Instead of being about Patrick's life and Patrick's painting, this article is about Patrick's death and Patrick's painting, about paintings that make a lot of sense and a death that doesn't.

To say to yourself, "Patrick is not the first person (or the first good painter) to die of AIDS and won't be the last" is to do more than express a sad fact. It expresses a resignation that nothing could have been done to save Patrick, that nothing can be done to save the next person. It expresses a recognition of the fact that Patrick died in a country that spends billions on devising and manufacturing weaponry, while only spending a sliver on research to combat a virus that is killing our citizens in an ugly and relentless manner. What good is it to be immune to takeover by some other world power, if we are not immune to a deadly virus that eats away at our very bodies?

At the bottom of the answer to that question lies another sad fact, and another recognition: Patrick, as a gay person and a gay artist, is part of what is presently termed a "marginalized" population. In the "melting pot" we call America, however, it is precisely in the margins that the largest and most interesting body of text is written.

When Patrick last visited UCSB on the occasion of his one man show he was asked about his acceptance in the gay community vis a vis his acceptance in the art community. He replied that the gay community had embraced his work, but the art community had not. The gay community has indeed recognized Patrick. Articles illustrating and/or discussing his work have appeared in national gay publications, from the serious to the soft core. It seems strange that the art community has not given him equal attention. Could it be that it has marginalized Patrick's work? If the art community is so ready to dismiss the margins as not speaking to the whole, why then does a picture like Bronzino's Allegory—a picture painted hundreds of years ago for a tiny, aristocratic elite with a subject no one can any longer decipher—hang in the British Museum? Why does contemporary work which speaks only to other artists in a hermetic, conceptual language sell for thousands of dollars? Certainly it is neither the size of the audience that determines a work's greatness, nor its ability to appeal to the largest common denominator. It is the power to communicate above and beyond the specific circumstances of its production that accounts for a work of art's greatness. Patrick's work has this power.

The Patrick Angus Exhibition at the College of Creative Studies Gallery opened on the 28th of February amidst much controversy. The CCS Provost, Dr. Adrian Wenner, requested that "any works of a sexual nature" be omitted. He also requested that a wall be erected to protect those who might be offended.

Richard Bolton, chair of the Art Studio Department, engineered a compromise. The wall would be constructed, but no works would be omitted. The media, however, had already picked up the story. The *New York Native* ran the first article, followed by *The Advocate*. UCSB's *Daily Nexus*, which gave the story an entire front page on the day of the opening, followed up with an Encore edition. The *Santa Barbara News Press* gave the exhibition a front-page headline, and it was reviewed in the *Independent*, a Santa Barbara weekly.

The controversy caused the opening to be the most successful in a decade at the CCS Gallery. In attendance were a collector for the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and a member of the Japanese royal family. David Hockney, who owns six paintings in the show, flew in from Chicago to view the exhibition and meet with Patrick.

While in Santa Barbara, Patrick spoke at a CCS Symposium about his work, showing slides and answering questions. While Hockney was obviously one of his heroes, he also mentioned Gore Vidal and Pablo Picasso both of whom he admired for their courage to depict things as they saw them. Patrick also described a revelation he had when he saw an exhibition

of the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec: he recognized faces in the cafe crowds. This led him to personalize his cast of characters, making them not just believable, but recognizable.

That sense of recognition, not just the recognition of faces and types, but of situations and sociologies lends Patrick's painting some of its power. Patrick's statement that "verisimilitude is not accuracy," echoing Matisse's sentiment, "exactitude is not truth," reminds us that his work is done from memory. His paintings are true fictions, works which capture and characterize the gay underworld. His subjects are sites of gay sociology: movie theaters, strip joints, bathhouses, pick-up bars and cruisy parks.

Patrick's painting is about breaking taboos. It is also about the body politic, male nudity, ritualized gatherings, *penii* and sex/love. The paintings, which portray aspects of gay life in New York City during the 1980s, raise important questions about masturbaton, pornography, and the ennui of casual available sex in the AIDS era.

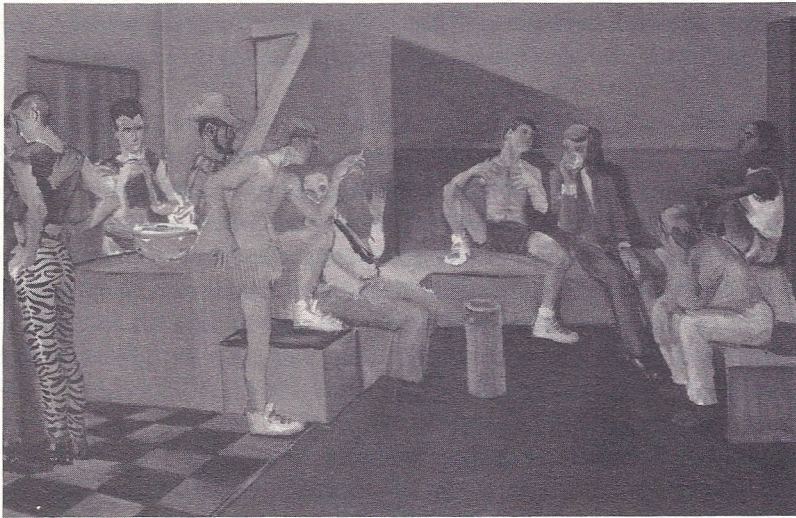
Patrick paints scenes that have never been painted before. While we've seen paintings of stripshows, bathhouses, or the relationship between the hustler and the john, these scenes have been portrayed in relation to the heterosexual experience. Every major city, however, has its gay equivalent of these scenes.

When asked about style, Patrick replied "I don't worry about style. The paintings determine the style." The similarity between the works is more due to a similarity of approach than one of style. Nevertheless, there are consistencies in Patrick's process that give his paintings a style. His use of the *alla prima* (all-at-once) technique on a black canvas give his colors a brilliance and a flatness that create a visual tension that lends power to his work. The settings, often bathed in eerie, artificial light, allow him to explore vibrant and exciting color juxtapositions: turquoise shadows, orange glitter. A reprisal of 18th and 19th century concerns with multi-figure compositions, deep space, and use of light to create drama are acknowledged by Patrick and integrated into his modern idiom.

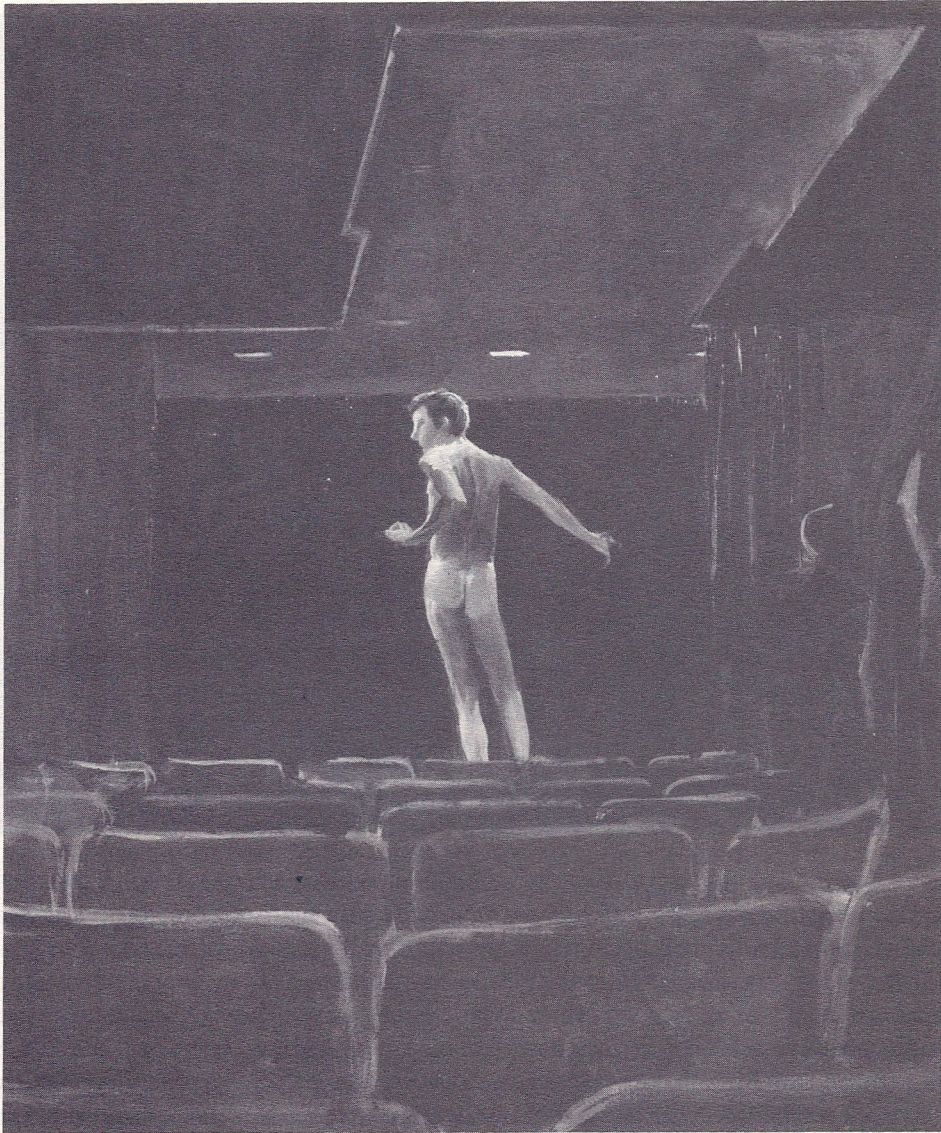
As a painter, Patrick's use of light and color is employed to advantage in the Gaiety Theatre scenes. He is a pure painter—a *painter's painter*. You walk right into the paintings and feel the rawness: the grimy walls and sticky floors, the dark deeds performed in the shadows. Patrick paints these scenes from memory, and part of their power lies in the way he exposes the customer. The rumpled older men, overweight, balding and self-conscious, gathering at the stage like moths to the flame, thinking that no one sees them as they cruise the uninhibited young boys. But Partick Angus is watching, and his paintings expose this ritualized aspect of homosexual behavior.

When asked about the ubiquitous white socks on the naked boys, Patrick explained that his work is concerned with the fantasies of men. These boys cash in on the fantasy of the young jock coming in from the field, stripping in front of his locker, about to wash away his sweat in the communal shower. Revved up and horny, their muscles bulge and ripple with tension, looking for release. Patrick's attention to a detail like white socks reveals his understanding of the socio-sexual matrix woven therein.

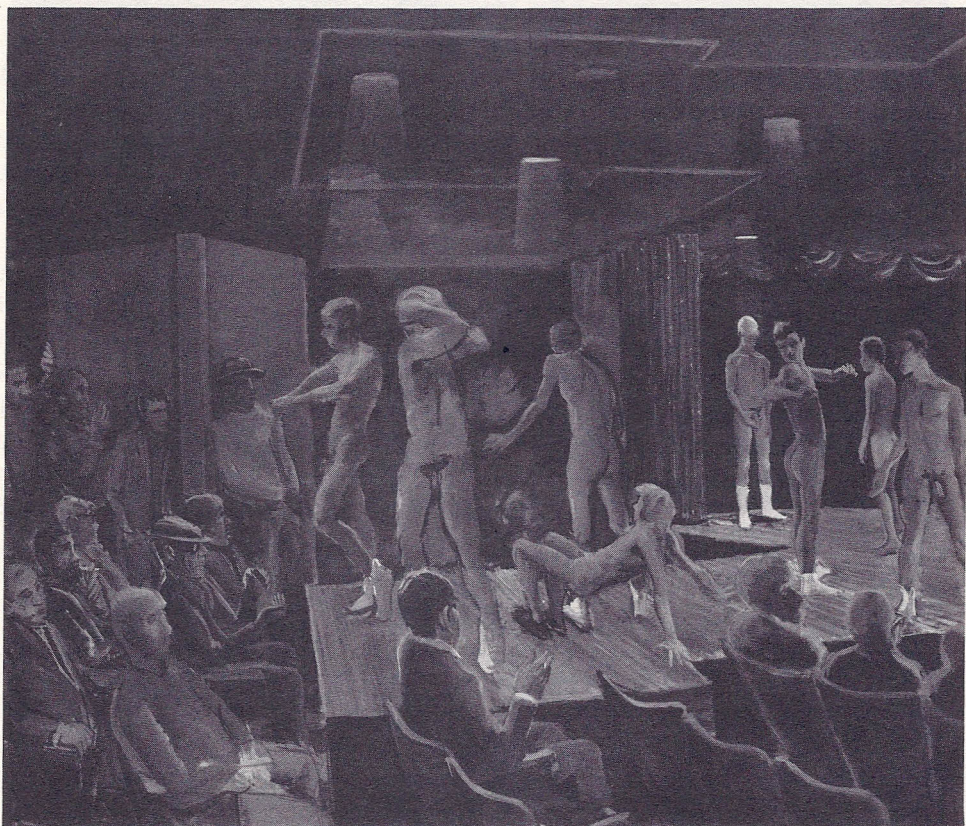
Likewise, Patrick captures the "games men play with each other." Gay men, he observes, are too often "looking for the ideal man and not at the real men around them." Patrick presents this looking, exposes it, de-naturalizes it. Other paintings present the rituals and relationships between the hustler and the client. The hustler poses in a provocative manner coded as "straight" as if to imply that he and his buddies are only in it for the money; the johns alternately leer and look bored, as if it were only a financial transaction they were engaged in and not an admission of their desire. By the telling postures, by the charged atmosphere, by the very structure of his compositions, Patrick manages to bring home this pose of disinterestedness, pregnant with lust.



The Battle Between Youth and Age is a bathhouse scene that captures the characteristic poses (and posturings) of the young men in shorts and the older men in suits. Negotiations for the evening's pleasure are evoked, while others go about their business of watching, ignoring, drinking, or kissing in the corner. The allegorical nature of the title reminds us that we are looking at a modern history painting, an eternal commedia re-enacted on a nightly basis. The actors may change, but the play is always the same. Patrick presents this play, one which is based on looking, for us to look at. We are looking at his looking of their looking.



Another One Bites the Dust portrays a solitary, male nude figure. He is on stage in an empty theater, while two figures are leaving through a side door. The layering of the seats is like the petals of a lotus; in the center, against the dark, rectangular background, the figure rises up. The darkness and emptiness of the theater create an image of rejection.



The Grand Finale is a *tour de force* of brilliant brushwork and complex composition. Patrick masters the difficult problem of fitting many figures onto a spatial plane. Eight young men on stage, nude except for their socked feet, pose and strut for the older, impassive men in the audience—the dance of youth and age. A black man in the front row is clapping and keeping time. The faceless dancers are individually lit with colored spots, and one—again in the white socks—appears to be playing with himself. The customers are portrayed with character and sensitivity. They are real people, with distinct, individualized faces, while the dancer's faces are blurred images.

Patrick Angus' paintings do not belong to the "margin" any more than his death does. Both are part of human experience, and both say something about the human condition. Both are worth thinking about. Both are worth reading into.

Image Credits

- Cover: Patrick Angus, *Chain Reaction*, 1986, acrylic on canvas.
- Page vi: Gary H. Brown, *Pat*, etching, 1992.
Department of Art, U.C. Santa Barbara
- Pages 41-54: Christopher Wolf, *SHE NO EVIL*, 1992, (excerpts)
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- Page 55: Neva Lindburg, *Tides*, 1991, sand.
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- Page 84: Patrick Angus, *The Battle Between Youth and Age*,
1983, acrylic on canvas. Collection of David Hockney.
- Page 85: Patrick Angus, *Another One Bites the Dust*, 1985,
acrylic on canvas.
- Page 86: Patrick Angus, *The Grand Finale*, 1985, acrylic on
canvas, Collection of David Hockney.
- Page 95: Gary H. Brown, *The Blond Boy*, 1986, acrylic on paper.
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