

Press Release:

Around the Corner

Bill Rice

April 06 - May 13, 2023

Opening Reception:

Thursday, April 06, 6-8 pm

steven harvey fine art projects

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I am interested in what happens around the corner of the surface. My paintings are not designed to be viewed only from the front. The edges are important, I like the feel of paint and canvas and paper. Ideally I would like to invest the rectangle - the basic unit in any city scape - with the sensuality, color, texture I find in the streets. I like to record the young, elegant, Black, Asian and Hispanic men who know how to move and glow in what would otherwise be a dreary landscape.

Bill Rice

The sprawling exhibition of *Salon/Saloon*, which took place in 1984 in Bill Rice's East 3rd street studio was a kaleidoscope of visual activity of the period, made possible by Bill's generosity and inclusive sensibility. He created a permissive space for visual artists, actors and performers and provided an example of what could be done when they worked together to create something outside of traditional confines. It was an expansive mix of artists, some of whom have gone on to become well-known and others still under the radar.

Bill studied painting at Middlebury College in Vermont, where he was born in 1931. He moved to New York in 1953, to the Lower East Side where he remained for the rest of his life. Though the neighborhood was dismissed as a dangerous one in later decades, it was a space characterized by a culture of radical artistry, populated by immigrants, queer men, beatniks, and jazz musicians. He was close to artists such as David Wojnarowicz, Jeff Weiss, and Peter Hujar. Rice preserves the memory of this community in his work, saturating his images with a sensual, textured warmth and sense of curiosity, comfort and potential.

The objects in Bill's studio were weathered, accruing wear as they sat around through the years, a quality in keeping with his somewhat dour imagery of tenement buildings and anonymous men interspersed with occasional bursts of light and color. Rice is a chronicler, depicting moments of intimacy between others. His work is vulnerable and sensual, but it is also removed, voyeuristic; the images come to us from a distance, glimpses from the artist's window to the street below, or

into rooms across the way. Holland Cotter described his work in the New York Times, writing “the pictures with their thin washes of oil paint are at once rigorously geometric in structure and smokily gestural as abstract Phillip Gustons.”

Bill’s depiction of New York with his Proustian attention to detail creates a kind of visual mythology of the city. He gives equal attention to the bodies and lives of men he loved as to the landscape of taxis, automobiles and storefronts which inhabit his paintings, drawings and notes, interacting with the city through a distinctly erotic gaze. In centering the tangible and the visual Rice creates an ode to the city like a more “out” version of Whitman, using his memory and experience to construct a narrative of his surroundings. Rene Ricard called Bill “the greatest living painter of the city,” declaring that “in his painting there is no city other than New York, black New York...” His body of work functions as archive and epistemology, preserving the people and character of the Lower East Side through his loving gaze. As Walter Robinson wrote, “As the penniless multicultural bohemia that was the LES is redeveloped out of existence, its heavy-hearted romantic spirit passes into artworks like these.”

In addition to his painting, Rice was involved with an experimental theater and film community until his death. He fell into acting, saying that he auditioned for a play “on a dare,” and ended up working with Jim Jarmusch, Robert Frank, Taylor Mead, Jim Neu, Rene Ricard, David Wojnarowicz and filmmaking duo Scott and Beth B. In collaboration with author Gary Indiana he formed a garden theater in the backyard of his studio. He also worked with the Gertrude Stein scholar Ulla Dydo on books about Stein for many years, and did extensive, unpublished research on Picasso’s *Demoiselles D’Avignon*.

Rice’s paintings were exhibited in 1984 at the Patrick Fox Gallery and in 1987 at 56 Bleecker Gallery. Richard Milazzo selected Rice’s paintings for a show at Sidney Janis Gallery in 1996. The last exhibition before his death in 2006 was at Mitchel Albus Gallery the year prior. SHFAP has exhibited his work many times, in a solo show in 2011 as well as several group shows, including one with the work of his friend Richard Morrison in 2019.