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Carmen Cicero: 'Early Works: 1970-1980s'

By Roberta Smith

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Carmen Cicero, now in his late 80s, has worked in several styles, none his own, but always with enough panache to establish proprietary claims. In the 1950s, he was a promising second-generation Abstract

Expressionist who exhibited regularly, pursuing thatches of autonomist lines on paper and canvas, examples of which are owned by all New York's major museums.



A disastrous studio fire in 1971 seems to have turned Mr. Cicero toward his own comical version of neo-Expressionism figuration, a vibrant, sometimes visionary style enlivened by vigorous brushwork, radiant color and a sense of high drama. The earliest work here is "Crime" from 1976, which features a blizzard of short rapid brush strokes — a kind of parody of Abstract Expressionism — that, with study, reveals a tough guy firing a gun in the viewer's direction. It is like an American-gangster version of the thick-limbed young men for which the Italian artist Sandro Chia became known.

Carmen Cicero's "Man With Mask," from 1987, at the June Kelly Gallery.

Credit Courtesy of the artist

More accomplished is "The Surprise at the Window," from 1981, in which a ghostly Count Dracula scares the wits, cigarettes and martinis out of a bunch of soigné Hollywood silent-film types standing in a wood cabin — or on a stage — alive with light and shadow. The generally white-on-white "Nightmare" (1986), which depicts a madman in a frozen landscape dotted with faces has some wonderful moments, while the relatively small "Man With Mask" (1987) contrasts a green hat and a vivid orange mask. It is in many ways a perfect painting that some museum should add to its Cicero holdings.

June Kelly Gallery
166 Mercer Street, SoHo
Closes on Tuesday