

ORDINARY VISIONARIES

An exploration of creativity through the lives of a potter, a poet, a painter and a physiologist

JANUARY 15-28, 1987 THE INDEPENDENT 11

BY ANDREA SELICH



Painter David Larson in his backyard in Raleigh.

Photo by Wendy Walsh

Showing himself

Long before I met Georgia Blizard, I joined in her scorn of the self-centeredness that seems to accompany fine art and writing these days. But then I met David Larson and found this trait itself producing exciting work. Even as Larson paints portraits of different people, he seems to be examining himself, and thereby revealing Americans' collective feelings.

I became interested in Larson when I saw some of his work on display at the Paper Plant in Raleigh. His pastel drawings of people drew me to them. It was something in the figures' eyes—their shadows and hollowness were intensely realistic and emotional.

If I had to think of a name for his style, I would call it New Wave—not simply because the figures almost looked like they had spiked hair and were listening to punk rock, but also because after I spoke with Larson and learned his philosophies, I felt his work was a new wave in portraiture. It is a technique of social realism flavored, not by a political message, but rather by a human revelation.

I favored a particular painting he did of a woman in a green dress. She stands in a bare room looking out at the viewer. She has one breast exposed. Traditionally, nudes have been of women and I've always thought that was *exploitative*, but Larson's painting showed something different. Again, I saw it in the woman's eyes, she had already been exploited. The portraitist wasn't possessing her, but showing her victimization almost the way Foster Parents posters show ravaged children.

David Larson is tall and skinny with stringy brown hair like out of the early '70s; with his grandfather glasses and reddened face, he looks much older than his 30 years. Occasionally he can be convinced to do a flyer for a local band, but otherwise he paints only portraits, using images from his head as opposed to live models. His development as an artist began when he attended an Atlanta art school. Later, he graduated from Eastern Carolina University with a degree in painting and has been working, in and out of Raleigh, ever since.

He lives in a weathered house across from the Pine Scare Dairy shipping plant in a part of Raleigh that's busy from 7 to 5, and dead quiet the rest of the time. Inside, most of the house is cold and dark and clearly a place of work. He keeps only one room heated, the

room where he would seem to paint, eat and sleep. There are empty frames on the walls and two of his drawings are tacked up over the mantle.

Between sips of beer he told me, "Society confuses the hell out of me." He sees Ameri-

"A landscape has no soul,"

David Larson told me.

"I believe in eyes. They are

windows. Through them you

can see people's intent."

cans as hollow commodities and also human beings struggling to maintain their emotional vulnerability. "People tell me what I paint is weird. I think it's absurd, but it's only a reflection of the world."

He paints what he sees in people, anything from confusion to direction to sexuality to intellectualism. He says he wants to portray

the soul. "A landscape has no soul," he told me. "I believe in eyes. They are windows. Through them you can see people's intent." He says his own experience comes out in his artwork, and indeed I could see both his own struggles and his eyes in the people he painted.

Even though quite a few galleries are pushing his work and he does consider himself an artist, Larson remains hesitant about the commercial aspect of his work. He works odd jobs—at a bookstore right now—to pay the rent. "I got used to being poor a long time ago," he says. "If I was wealthy, I guess I'd give my drawings away. I'm a horrible businessman."

He keeps on painting, and putting his work up for sale. Selling paintings is a way of relating to people, albeit a risky way. "People buy something because it strikes an emotional or intellectual chord, or because it's going to look good over the couch. I'm most flattered when they buy a drawing of mine because they recognize a familiar stance or emotion it shows," he said. "I hate the way people are commodified by today's hard-core consumerism, and I hate the way salability probably affects my work—it ruins the purity of the idea the same way even this interview does."

That's the nice thing about art. It provides a convenient retreat—and a place to celebrate—the perils of daily life.