



SYLVIA SNOWDEN

Brody's

SNOWDEN'S acrylics on canvas, hard-board and paper are titled with people's names, but they are not portraits in the usual sense. There is no attempt to capture and reveal a sitter's character. Instead, Snowden gives us expressive, energy-charged, often disturbing figures that share a power-packed anonymity despite their names. The poses (crouched, splayed, reaching out), the skeletal shadows and masses of chests and head, the cartoon quality of the sitters' attitudes do not easily resolve into individ-



COURTESY BIRDY'S GALLERY

Sylvia Snowden, *Ethyl Moyd*, acrylic on hardboard. Snowden's "portraits" are anonymous despite their titles.

dium. Now she demonstrates the emotional and ironic levels that can be achieved when that skill is applied to the complexities of the human condition. These exuberantly menacing figures stay in the mind with a force that is both genuine and fresh.

—Lee Fleming

ual character readings, as with conventional portraiture. Instead, Snowden aims for the edge of the cliff that overlooks the cliché, positioning her subjects just this side of the banal in color combinations and gestures. They never fall into the abyss, but gain, in the uneasy balance, a powerful presence. Snowden makes us aware that there is a person behind the "personality" she is de-personalizing. She illuminates the barriers that prevent our seeing a person as individual rather than as part of a group.

The banana hands of her men and women wave, clutch and threaten; the paint flows, roils and bubbles across the surfaces, resolving into figures only at a distance. At close range, we see only gradations, hills and valleys of plastic color, stroke turning back on stroke. The whites, reds and browns that dominated from afar disappear. The stances of her figures, their ages and places in life, are equally evanescent. Sometimes these people look like shambling, helpless flabby-breasted women. Other times they are furious priestesses, unleashing vitriol in the greens, blues and ochers that create their forms.

Annie Williams and *Ronnie Hill* convey a sense of the body as continent. In *Annie Williams*, the elephantine legs of the woman breach the raw canvas ground like the land defines the ocean; in the latter work, the look of a map where "figure" meets "ground" is even more pronounced. And if the extension of the body can be metaphoric, so can the body's truncation: *Red Steve*, a long, horizontal work, uses the confines of the picture plane to cut off two of three figures at neck and lower leg. The third and shortest figure loses his leg at the knee. *Red* takes on a meaning other than color, seeming to be a shorthand for skin and bone cut, spirit flayed.

In her earlier paintings, Snowden revealed that she knows how to use her me-