

Making Houses Fly

Realism, fantasy, and current events come together in **Adam Cvijanovic's** lavish mural paintings

BY BARBARA POLLACK

I'm not a minimalist," comments Adam Cvijanovic, surveying his Chinatown studio, a small space packed with books, ashtrays, paint cans, photographs, and rolled-up paintings leaning haphazardly against the walls. There is



no sign of a computer or a projector, the tools usually used by artists working in a hyperrealistic style. Cvijanovic relies on his imagination to conjure the suburban landscapes hit by cyclones and the ruined space stations that he paints and installs on walls and ceilings in contemporary versions of the old-fashioned diorama.

Cvijanovic (pronounced SVEE-YAN-o-vich) is a scruffy guy with longish hair, usually dressed in dark T-shirt and jeans. One day last spring he was smoking a cigarette as he surveyed a new painting, *Fabuloso*, which he was preparing for a show at the Blindarte Contemporanea gallery in Naples. The work features a house flying through the sky, its contents spilling out of the doorway. On the floor of the studio were a can of Coca-Cola and a box of

Ritz crackers, two objects that also appear in the painting. The work's size—about 10 by 12 feet—and its oval shape make one think of the ceiling murals in Renaissance palaces, but the imagery is entirely of the moment. It's a vision of the hous-

ing market spinning out of control in the midst of a recession.

"Everything I do has to do with global events in some way, because I believe in mixing the personal and the political," Cvijanovic says. He agrees that sometimes the real world has collided with his apocalyptic visions in surprising ways. He painted a monumental image of spectators watching a space-shuttle launch for an exhibition at the Rhode Island School of Design's Museum of Art in 2003. On the day of the opening, the Columbia shuttle blew up. Suddenly the painting was not an optimistic celebration of space exploration but an homage.

For his 2005 exhibition at Bellwether Gallery in New York, Cvijanovic painted a mural of tract houses whirling in the air, their shingled



LEFT: SONYA GEFMAN; RIGHT: ARTHUR EVANS

Adam Cvijanovic
installing
Suspension of
Disbelief, 2007,
at MASS MoCA.





roofs and shaky foundations breaking apart in the wind. Called *Love Poem (10 Minutes After the End of Gravity)*, it covered three walls of the gallery. The show opened less than two weeks after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, a fact that no one viewing the cyclonic scene could ignore. "The piece was about the disintegration of my marriage; it had nothing to do with global events at all," says Cvijanovic. "But I think that is one of the interesting things about using narrative, because it echoes back and forth with viewers."

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1960, Cvijanovic is finally experiencing the security of a solid art career. He dropped out of high school at 17 to become an artist, dispensing with college or art school, and found early success with expressionistic suburban scenes that he showed in New York, first at Bess Cutler Gallery in the '80s and later at Richard Anderson Fine Arts in the '90s. But it was during a lull in his career that he had the idea of creating panoramic murals. He was working as a decorative painter on the side, a trade he picked up in 1989 and stuck with for years.

"If you are going to be a representational painter, this is the equivalent of going to boot camp," he says of decorative wall painting. "You have to paint a lot and fast without any real confirmation or acknowledgment." He was applying a popular design called Eldorado to the walls of a breakfast nook in a

***Belshazzar's Feast*,
2008, a work inspired
by D. W. Griffith's
1916 film *Intolerance*.**

house on Long Island. "I thought that painting Eldorado for the umpteenth time is boring," Cvijanovic says. "But the form—painting on all four walls of a room—is really interesting, and nobody was doing that at the time."

To make his murals "mobile," Cvijanovic paints on unstretched Tyvek, a packing material used in construction and FedEx envelopes. Oil paints erode this material, so Cvijanovic uses water-based Flashe and house paints, giving the works a flat, opaque quality. The finished work is glued into place so it looks as if Cvijanovic had painted directly onto the wall. He may use a computer to get an idea of how a work will look installed, but he rarely relies on technology to work out the details of the perspectives so uncannily re-created in his paintings.

"None of these landscapes are realistic per se. Most of them are just fantasies," says Cvijanovic, who made an exception and worked from photographs when he was preparing "Colossal Spectacle," his 2008 show at Bellwether. It was inspired by D. W. Griffith's lavish 1916 historical drama, *Intolerance*, and the director's descent into financial ruin after the film flopped, despite his huge success with his previous film *The Birth of a Nation*.

For the central work in the show, *Belshazzar's Feast*, Cvijanovic painted life-size portraits of his family, friends, and

colleagues playing roles in the celebration at the Babylonian court. He copied the colossal set from the climax of Griffith's film, complete with an invading Persian army interrupting the festivities. He attached the mural sections to nine 16-foot-high wooden panels arranged in a circle. Painted in the purplish tones of the original film, *Belshazzar's Feast* is a vision of the art world on the verge of destruction. The artist appears as the prophet Daniel, who foretold Babylon's doom.

"This was a show about a certain degree of hubris, of trying to reach unattainable highs, and the infection of ambition and greed," says the artist. He was dealing with his own hubris after his success with works that seemed to echo the Hurricane Katrina disaster. "This was really a giant self-portrait," he says of *Belshazzar's Feast*. "I had some personal success, and all this stuff came to me, and I was asking, 'What is all this doing to me?' I wanted to look at that ambition." His personal statement resonated with viewers, especially those in the art world, though the piece was exhibited months before the art market's decline. Once again it appeared that Cvijanovic had predicted a disaster.

Bellwether closed last June, but owner Becky Smith continues to work with Cvijanovic on individual projects. Prices for his work range from \$15,000, for a small painting, to \$100,000, for a mural.

***The Bayou*, 2008, lined the walls of a Lower Ninth Ward residence in New Orleans as part of the Prospect.1 biennial.**

In the fall of 2008, Cvijanovic revisited Hurricane Katrina when he participated in the Prospect.1 New Orleans biennial. He painted a mural in three rooms of a ruined house in the Lower Ninth Ward—a wraparound view of a bayou, with moss dripping from trees and birds alighting on shimmering water. "The house was an equal component of the piece," says the artist, who was inspired by its deterioration and thought of the painted scene as a vision of nature reclaiming a man-made environment. "Those earlier paintings that people thought were about Katrina were all about destruction, but this was really about redemption," he says.

Nevertheless, this work, like many of his others, conveys an end-of-civilization mood. "I guess I have always liked ruins," says Cvijanovic. "It certainly changes the way you think about present-day stuff to think that one day you will be experienced by people in the future with the same bafflement and wonder that we experience people from the past."

He insists, however, that all of his work comes from his fascination with creating illusory space. "The idea is very compelling to me," he says. "There's something about making a realistic painting that is a very spiritual thing in a funny way. On one hand, it is an illusion, but on the other hand, it's not. It's just paint." ■

