

S & FILMS

Morgan Bulkeley's urban dramas

PERSPECTIVES

By Christine Temin
Globe Staff

Morgan Bulkeley's art comes directly from his environment.

Bulkeley summers in the Berkshires, where he carves huge, abstract outdoor sculptures out of the trees on his property.

He spends his winters in the less bucolic confines of Somerville, where he makes paintings of bleak buildings covered in cheap asphalt siding or patched with plywood.

* A selection of these recent oil on linen works is at Stux Gallery, 36 Newbury st., through Jan. 7.

The buildings are Bulkeley's stages; looking through their windows is akin to viewing some intense and bloody drama taking place beyond the proscenium arch.

Only it's hard to tell if these dramas are Greek tragedies or soap operas.

On some of the walls inside Bulkeley's structures hang tiny pictures of nuclear holocaust, featuring mushroom clouds; above the buildings are natural clouds, done in puffy pink, like cotton candy. The people are stubbily proportioned, painted in a primitive style which is almost endearing — until you notice the guns in some of their hands.

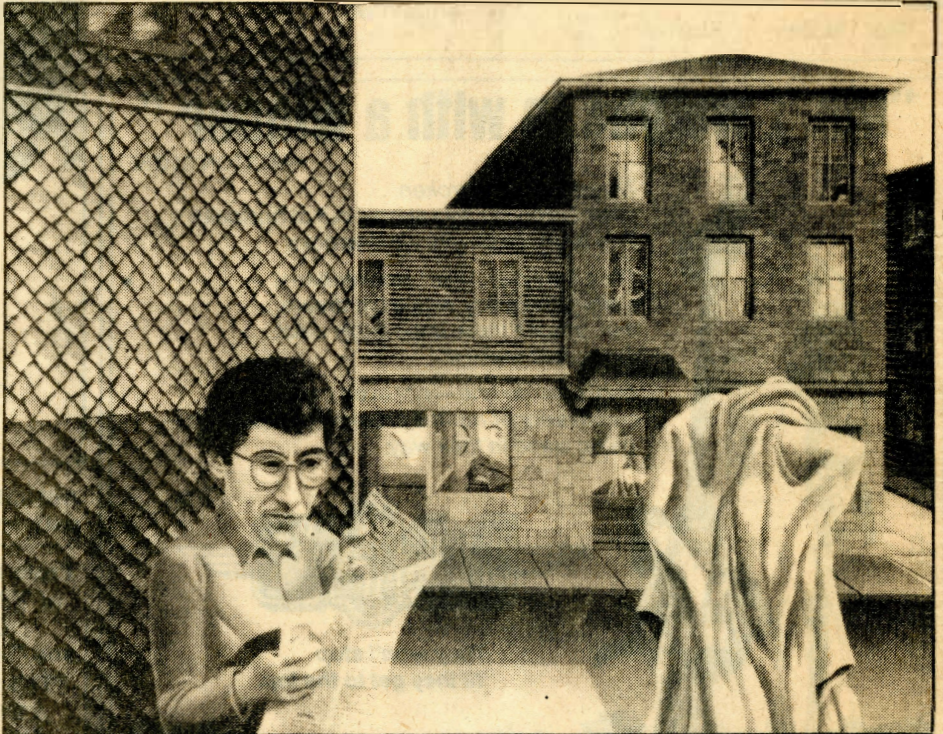
The buildings themselves are depressing, but the neighborhoods they inhabit, with their old-fashioned storefronts, are cozy in a rundown way. And some of that asphalt siding is done in a glowing, amethyst to sapphire palette.

Inside the windows we glimpse events both gruesome and weird: People fighting violently, someone vacuuming water spilling over the edge of a sink.

Bulkeley works some of his art heroes into his paintings: In one window, Vincent Van Gogh is cutting off his ear; several Frank Stellas grace these humble, working-class walls.

Certain images repeat.

Besides the mushroom cloud, there is a colander, the sort used to drain vegetables, which lies on a living-room



"Bob and Cloaked Form," an oil on linen by Morgan Bulkeley from his show at the Stux Gallery.

PHOTO BY GEORGE VASQUEZ

sofa in one painting and is used to charm a snake in another.

A reappearing white cloth blows in front of a building, hangs from a clothesline, or wraps around a stick frame to form a tepee.

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Although Bulkeley paints these objects with complete clarity, he hides their meaning.

To unravel them, we'd need a key, just as we need outside information to

know the meaning of an empty glass or a particular flower or animal in certain late medieval or renaissance works.

But we can't look up Bulkeley's private iconography in reference books, the way we can with renaissance art; we can only guess about it, as we do with the disparate elements in surrealist painting.

In the earlier works, those from a year or two ago, Bulkeley's imagery is tantalizingly minimal.

He'll show us a hand wrapped around a curtain: The implication is that an unseen figure is pulling it aside in order to glimpse out at us.

In the 1983 pieces, the story is more fully fleshed out, yet the mystery remains.

In "Carriage at Crossroads," for instance, a blue baby carriage is parked on a sidewalk, a hand with a cane reaches up from lower corner, and inside the building, a man crouches in the tepee: Perhaps we've stumbled on the scene of a kidnapping.