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ART; Paintings Do the Talking, Without Too Many Specifics

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GARY KOMARIN doesn't want to say too much about his paintings, but he's not brusque about it. He's almost apologetic, actually, but in the course of explaining why he'd rather let the paintings speak for themselves, he ends up telling quite a bit.

Oddly enough, the paintings are very much the same way. Seemingly imprecise in their imagery, austere in palette, self-absorbed in feeling, their surfaces gritty and uningratiating, they can nevertheless become eloquent, for those patient enough to give them time.

Although abstract, Mr. Komarin's paintings sometimes contain shapes that are quite legible -- a wig or a hat, for instance -- but more often they tend to suggest many things without getting quite specific about any of them. And in conversation, the artist is not eager to make them any more specific. The forms resonate when they are at once strange and familiar.

"I don't know what this form is," Mr. Komarin says, walking across the gallery to indicate "Estragon," a painting from 1998. "Maybe it reminds me of a bongo -- but if I start to think of it as a bongo, that calls up all kinds of associations that are irrelevant to the painting. So I try to dissociate from that while I'm working on a painting.

"It would be misleading to put a name to these forms. As a viewer you bring something different to them, depending on your own experience -- depending on what you saw last week, or what you read, or maybe what you ate."

Often the forms echo the awkwardness of children's art. "Most artists love children's drawings because they're so direct and free," Mr. Komarin says. But his nebulous, seemingly half-formed or half-

identified shapes are meant less to recall the way children draw than their experience of seeing things without knowing what they are, what he calls "a childlike sense of wonder and bafflement."

When asked whether a recurrent form in some of his most recent paintings, a simple loop attached to a vertical line, is really meant to be seen as a noose, Mr. Komarin acknowledges that he sees it that way too, explaining that he'd been thinking of the children's word game hangman. But he doesn't disavow the sinister overtones of the image, speculating that the game's origins are linked to the fact that hangings were once a form of public spectacle or popular entertainment.

Although Mr. Komarin has lived in Flanders for the last 14 years, his tough, somewhat taciturn manner still evokes New York City, where he was born and grew up. He has been exhibiting his work nationally since 1981, but 2000 looks to be his busiest year ever. Along with this exhibition, he is also doing one-person shows this year in Atlanta, Des Moines, Palm Springs, Calif., and Washington.

After studying at Albany State University, he went on to get a master of fine arts at Boston University, where he studied with Philip Guston, the Abstract Expressionist painter who shocked his contemporaries in 1970 with the first of the crudely figurative canvases that occupied him until his death a decade later. The critic Hilton Kramer, for instance, derided him as "a mandarin masquerading as a stumblebum," but Guston's late work turned out to be enormously influential on younger artists.

As a teacher, Mr. Komarin recalls, "Guston made painting seem like a door to the unknown -- a way to explore yourself, the world, the human condition. He wanted you to paint what you don't know rather than what you know."

Guston's lesson in cultivating the unknown has clearly stuck with Mr. Komarin. And on a more superficial level, the teacher's peculiar sense of form can also still be traced in his former student's work -- in the way Mr. Komarin's bulbous forms can seem to echo, in an abstract way, the cigars, cyclopean heads and naked light bulbs in Guston's paintings.

Of course Guston is hardly the only predecessor whose influence has marked Mr. Komarin's canvases. The fact that many of the shapes he uses resemble jars and vessels becomes more explicable after he speaks of how much he admires Giorgio Morandi, the Italian modernist best known for his austere, intimate still lifes of bottles and other ordinary objects.

"Morandi did so much with space, forms, the way things touch," Mr. Komarin explains.

Mr. Komarin himself started out as a still-life painter rather than an abstractionist.

"That's because I like using what's at hand," he says, and this is true as much of his materials as of his imagery.

He points to one painting and shows how a vertical line from top to bottom is the seam that happened to be in the piece of canvas tarpaulin he'd found in a hardware store and decided to use instead of a fine artist's canvas. Often buried in his paint are post cards and other stray pieces of paper he's collaged onto the surface.

"Some painters can't work without special paints they have to order from Holland," he says. "I like good materials too, but if I were stuck in the studio with just brown and white paint and a box of dried oatmeal I'd figure out something I could do with them."