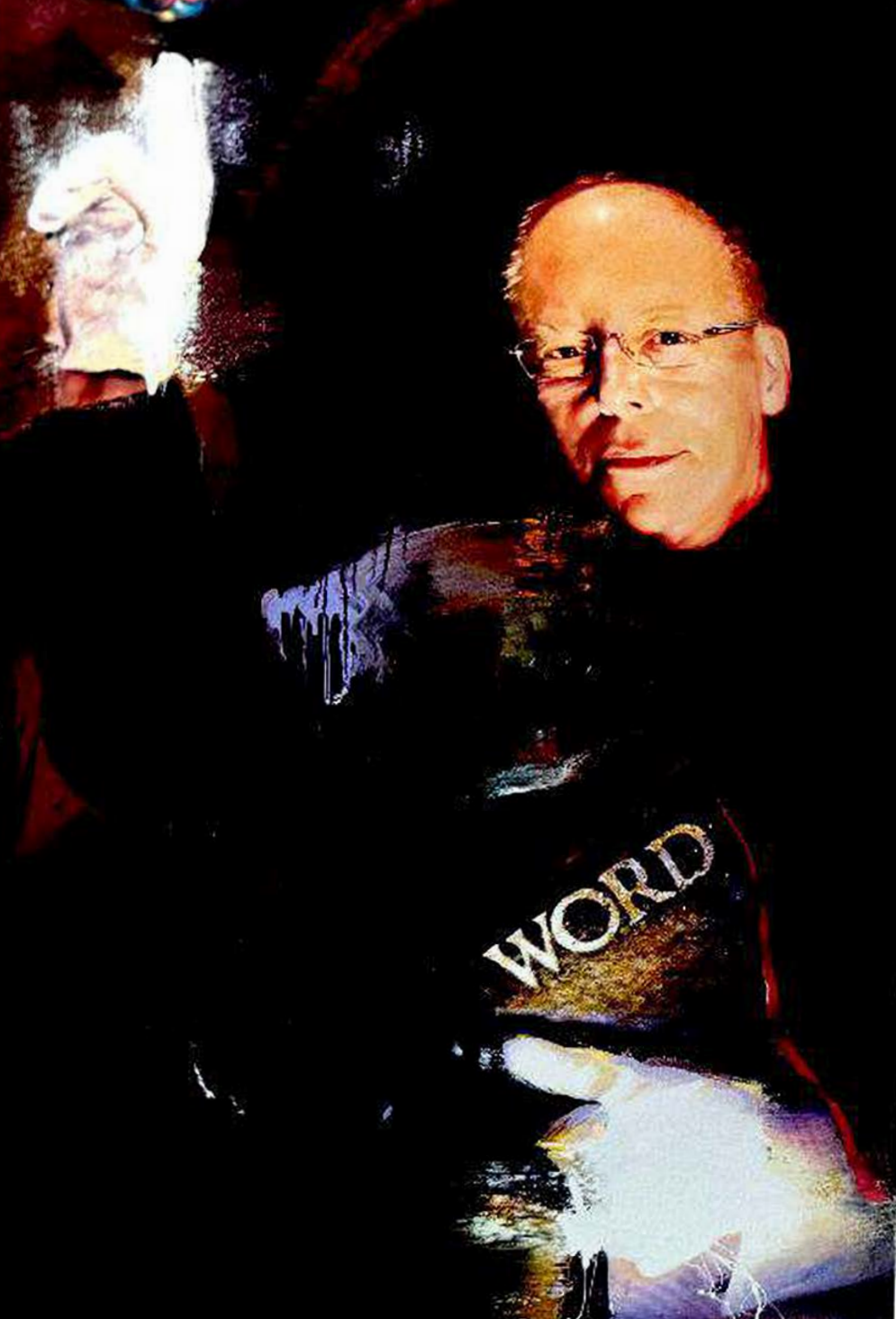




DEEP MELANCHOLY

BY CHARLES DESMARAIS

Let us imagine that you did not acquire this book in 2022 when it was first released. This copy you now hold was once bright and tightly bound—cold to the touch and redolent of printer's varnish not quite cured. It was the pride of artist Michael Brennan, who labored for years over his gentle caricature of the San Francisco art scene.

Now, though, Brennan is long dead, and along with him all the actors who inhabit these pages, and you found the book somewhere, dusty and dog-eared.

Are there libraries, and stores that sell old art books, still? Or have they gone the way of the itinerant circus and the carnival, those half-world spaces recalled here?

If not on the high shelf, filed among the Bs, perhaps you found this relic in a place less noble. On the floor of an old man's kitchen say, leveling a table leg. In any case, you took the curious thing home, aiming to puzzle it out.

So, to help with that, let's start with the obvious. People don't buy books for their prefaces. Even if they received it as a gift—no, especially if they received it as a token of respect or affection—the first person to own the object now in your hands knew the artist, or the subjects, or the scene. They knew what they were getting into, and they likely skipped this text.

Whether friend or constant supporter or casual buyer, the first owner saw a relationship not only between book and art, but book and self. The book was a souvenir of the experience of the paintings, and its acquisition was an extension of that experience, fully a part of it. Or else it was a report on paintings they had not seen but knew something about. In any case, for them this printed collection needed no introduction.

Here is what they understood: The time in which most of these paintings were made was an anxious one. That uneasiness is not "reflected in" Brennan's pictures, the way critics often describe the effect of social forces on art. Nor is it the most visible point in pictures full of bravado humor and blithe sarcasm. Yet angst sears its way through the works, like molten rock oozing from fissures in a volcanic slope.

Over the near-decade this series was in gestation, there was a year of concern that neighbors we had thought were fair and kind began cheering a fulminating, rage-baiting narcissist who demanded to be president. Then four years of ever-present fear that real power, stirred into that volatile mix, could set fire to our country or blow up our world. And yet more dread followed, as millions sickened and died while calculating politicians led a revolt against the efforts of science to save them, whether from a silent virus or the fiery effects of climate change.

Brennan and his longtime girlfriend had made a lovely home above a functional studio in an aging, light-industrial building in San Francisco. But, back then, steps from their front door, homelessness and its accompanying illnesses were 24-hour reminders of the limitations of our era's mercy.

Just about everyone in these pictures is smiling, sure, but all that is around them is washing away, literally dripping from the canvas.

The reproductions here are all of oil paintings, it must be said. Even the marks that look like they came from a spray-can were hand-painted to look that way. We who knew the people depicted in this series could have told you how uncanny the likenesses are—products of a photo-realistic style we might have said was borrowed from the artist's friend Bob Bechtle (whose image is included in the series). Except Bechtle tried to trick us into thinking that he was without imagination; Brennan embraces his fevered dreams. Bechtle used his extraordinary craftsmanship to dazzle and convince us. Brennan's technical mastery, on the other hand, confounds, raising a middle finger to artificial distinctions between art and craft, representation and abstraction.

Even at the time this series was first shown, a deep melancholy infused these ostensibly celebratory images. The Big Top was once a happy place, with balloon-toting children laughing at clowns more silly than sinister, and everyone in awe of the star performers. But by now the forced joy had been bled from the circus and absorbed by the sawdust and the cruelty of the sideshow had become too much to bear.

One hundred years earlier, German artists and others had faced up to a similar circumstance. The decadent beauty of Expressionism and the unease of that time, with its desperate images of cabaret high life amid an incendiary world, now had a new clarity in our own moment.

The people pictured in this book, and the milieu they constituted, were also on the cusp of extinction. Among them were some of the most influential figures in San Francisco art at

the time. Artists of accomplishment. Museum leaders, gallerists, collectors, and critics.

But change was underway. Not a few people had already passed. Yet it wasn't death that would consummate the transformation. It was youth. The very people not pictured here were the ones who would construct the future. (Or, shall we say, your present.)

Brennan made no claim to inclusiveness or completeness. On the contrary, his choices were entirely personal, and if the paintings jibed their subjects they also showed deep fondness.

Still, though the people who posed for portraits might have been friends of the artist, this is no mere Michael Brennan diary. By virtue of his attention, and of the dramatic lighting, bold colors, valiant poses he chose for them, he transformed sitters in his studio into mythic figures of a grand romantic cycle.

If most of the people depicted in these paintings knew most others, hardly anyone knew everyone. Except the artist. He made the whole thing up—a personal pantheon of notable San Franciscans, with himself at the center in tribute.

Surrounded. Subsumed by a moment in time unstable, a place unique, a hall of demigods conjured by the grace of his respect and love.

—Charles Desmarais
Glen Ellen, California