

Datebook



Photos by Connor Radnovic / The Chronicle
Clare Munn watches Eric White take a picture at the U.S. premiere of his "New Works" exhibit at Serge Sorokko Gallery.

SEEN *By Carolyn Zinko*

All eyes on the artist, not on the actress

Eric White a star as girlfriend, Patricia Arquette, hangs back

It was tempting to wonder whether artist Eric White's first show in San Francisco in 15 years would be eclipsed by the presence of his famous girlfriend, Hollywood actor Patricia Arquette. But at the Serge Sorokko Gallery on Geary Street on Thursday night, the star was the figurative realist, while Arquette quietly circled in outer orbit.



Ann Swanberg (left) talks with actress Patricia Arquette during the show in San Francisco

Guests packed the gallery so tightly it might have been easy to confuse it for a Dreamforce event, minus the bright blue conventioners' lanyards. It was easy to find White, who stands more than 6 feet tall, but Arquette was harder to spot, hiding in corners

Seen continues on E2

E2 | San Francisco Chronicle and SFChronicle.com

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

All eyes on figurative realist at show

See from page E1

or occasionally going outside for a smoke. Yes, she had given him a very public shout-out while accepting her Academy Award for best supporting actress (for "Boyhood") earlier this year, but she wanted him, "the great love of my life," to have top billing this night.

"To meet someone who is a fellow artist in a completely different discipline and who can teach you so much about this whole part of the arts that you don't know so intimately is wonderful," she said. "Art is a celebration of the life force. Art is the creative force. To live with that being alive in your house, there's nothing like it."

"But don't put that in there," she added. "This is about Eric." And indeed it was.

Collected by DiCaprio

White, a Detroit native, moved to San Francisco in 1990 after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design. The painter, who has been collected by Leonardo DiCaprio and had his works shown across Europe, got his start making nachos at the Punch Line and selling goods at Flax art supply before landing jobs as an illustrator and caricaturist for the likes of Mondo 2000, a glossy counterculture magazine, and Colossal Pictures, among others.

In 1996, he mounted a solo show at Billy Shire's La Luz de Jesus gallery in Los Angeles, and by 2000, had left for Brooklyn, N.Y. Actor David Arquette bought a piece in 2001, as did Patricia, which sparked a friendship with White that deepened in 2013, when the two began dating.

Unlike some art openings, where looky-loos sip from the street drop in for a sip of white in a plastic cup, the invite-only crowd contained trained eyes, like those of former Fine Arts Museums curator and author Robert Flynn Johnson, who lauded White's "technical facility merged with amazing imagination."

White, 47, calls his own work, which contains cinematic and surreal qualities, "figurative painting that has a strange edge to it." White says his style is fed by his love of 1940s Hollywood films, of cars (influenced by his childhood in the nation's automaking center) and of psychology.

Edgy works

In one work, a woman drives a car — from a steering wheel in the middle of the dashboard. In another, the driver is White, who appears to be looking at his own eyes in the rearview mirror, but a closer look shows the eyes to be the driver's, peering back at himself from a giant billboard in the distance.

Paul Felder, a photographer who worked in the '90s with



Photos by Connor Radnovic / The Chronicle

Actress Patricia Arquette (center) and Eric White (right) greet guests during the U.S. premiere of Whites' "New Works" exhibit at Serge Sorokko Gallery in San Francisco. It was his first show in San Francisco in 15 years.



Above: Kelly Niland crouches to get a better look at one of the artworks in the exhibition.



Left: Will Rostov (left), Susanna Merlo and Jason Kleinberg analyze a painting.

I Knew he was super talented from the moment I saw his work." Why? "His ability to distort reality like a bad acid trip"

Paul Felder, Photographer

White, then illustrating author A.J. Jacobs' book "The Two Kings: Jesus & Elvis," said, "I knew he was super talented from the moment I saw his work." Why? "His ability to distort reality like a bad acid trip," Felder said.

San Francisco sculptor Jud Bergeron showed with White at 111 Minna Gallery in the '90s and except for those in Europe, has been to every one of his friend's shows since 1996. The two bonded over art and the musical equivalent of surreal art — Frank Zappa. White, bicoastal for the past two years, had his larger pieces sent to the gallery by truck from Los Angeles. But he put a few smaller pieces in his car, and upon arriving in San Francisco, stowed them in Bergeron's Glen Park garage, the day of an unseasonable rain, before they were hung later in the week at the gallery. The two celebrated

the confluence of events by getting drunk on vodka, Bergeron said.

"The thing about being an artist is, as jovial as we are at openings, most of our lives are spent behind closed doors — it's almost a monastic existence," Bergeron said. "When the occasion comes to celebrate the work we've been doing, everyone shows up."

Cognoscenti attend

Among the cognoscenti at the show — up through Oct. 18 — were interior designer Gino Castano of Pallateur, architect Mark Dziewulski, Russian vice consul general Andrey Varlamov, Yountville winemaker Juan Mercado of Realm Cellars, and Dandy by the Bay, to name a few.

Also proud to watch the artist's career arc come full circle were White's brother, Justin, his father, Tom, his stepmother, Laurie, and his mother, Terri Tate, who, although she had worked as a psychiatric nurse and hypnotherapist, couldn't quite fathom the meaning in the paintings.

"I'm a psychological type," she said with a laugh, "but his work is way over my head."

Carolyn Zinko is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: czinko@sfgchronicle.com Twitter: @CarolynZinko