

Joel Griffith

Painter from Tivoli selected by Carolee Schneemann of New Paltz.

Joel Griffith's paintings are on-site productions — and the artist truly relishes his extended outdoor painting sessions in and around Tivoli, New York. Painting along the village's main street that extends to the railroad tracks and the banks of the Hudson River, or on the side streets that branch off to the north or south, or along one of the winding roads outside of town to the east. The artist craves to be on the spot — constantly encountering the people that live and work on a particular block or those that pass by at a certain time of day. "When you work on a painting for a few months," Griffith reports, "you get to meet all the people. They honk from their cars to say hello, and then stop back by to let me know whether I've made some progress — or, or to let me know that I haven't done a thing." When Griffith first started painting on site, he worked quickly to complete a canvas in a single hour. By the artist's own admission, Catherine Murphy's example encouraged him to devote more time and expend more effort on each painting. "She will take seven years on a painting," he says, "and contact with that kind of effort slowed down my work."

There is a wealth of detail to peruse in a Griffith painting, and part of the appeal in viewing his work is noticing the non-picturesque qualities. Griffith can revel in the non-descript places that do not usually claim attention and do not appeal to conventional tastes. In *Tivoli Tracks*, for example, the snow cover is mixed with frozen mud, the railroad lines are littered with electric switching boxes, and telephone poles regularly punctuate the landscape's deep perspective. In *Kidd Lane*, the backside of a stop sign and the clutter of electric lines are visible. In *Montgomery St. and Washington Ave.*, the neon light spells out "Budweiser" in the window of a bar already closed for the night, and the greenish glow of a TV set is seen through a second story window long after most have gone to bed. I ask how he manages to paint outdoors in the middle of winter on a work like *Scism Road*, depicting two mobile homes set on a hillside covered in deep snow. Griffith admits that he prefers to work on balmy summer nights, but for winter he has a pair of heavy-duty socks and felt-lined boots that, along with a thermos of hot coffee, allow him to paint for an hour or two at a time. "After a while one gets the spirit of the thing," he says, "and then one can always work out a few of the details in the studio." For Griffith, getting into the spirit of the thing is certainly more — much more — than merely recording the visual array with a certain exactitude or precision. This is evident in the way that he captures and records a site, somehow the cultural milieu and social tenor of a locale seeps into the very fabric of Griffith's canvases. It is a subtle and rare quality that cannot be described, but only appreciated while standing before one of the paintings. The history of the place, the life that goes on there from day to day and from generation to generation, is visible in Griffith's work. Every detail seemingly has a story to tell, right down to how the pavement was (or was not) repaired, why different street lamps were installed over time, and when certain types of house siding were popular. It's all there, but seeing it (or recognizing and appreciating it) requires knowing about it. Knowing his subject is part and parcel of what Joel Griffith does as a painter, it is his artistic work, a job that he practices day in and day out in Tivoli and its environs.

Griffith has come to be something of a local celebrity in Tivoli, as much a feature of the town as the street scenes he depicts. The village has recently commissioned four views of the town by Griffith for the newly restored town hall. This is an astute acquisition, for Tivoli of the early

21st century may one day be known from a Griffith painting — the way we know downtown Chicago of the 1940s from an all-night diner in *Nighthawks*, or the way we know 1930s New York from a stretch of Seventh Avenue storefronts in *Early Sunday Morning*. These iconic works by Edward Hopper offer telling precedents for Griffith's painting: there is a lack of occupants in Griffith's work (as is the case in Hopper's de-populated *Early Sunday Morning*); there is Griffith's refined ability to produce nocturnes (as is the case with Hopper's *Nighthawks*); and there is Griffith's proficiency at capturing specific effects of light — at different moments of the day, at different seasons of the year, from natural or man-made sources, on different surfaces and textures, or from all these factors combined.

Griffith's effort to achieve just the right lighting effect can border on the obsessive. The artist will point out that some of the street lights in Tivoli are more yellow and others are more white, depending on what kind of bulbs will fit which fixtures. Griffith revels in the challenge of getting the precise sheen of these lights reflecting off and through the leaves of the same tree on a still summer's night — and of course it matters whether the moon is full, or whether the cloud cover is low, or whether the tree is an oak or a cedar, healthy or diseased. That kind of careful attention to his subject is apparent even on cursory inspection of Griffith's canvases. The paintings are executed with a dexterity of touch that catches one's eye and sustains one's interest. Griffith's deftness of handling compels one to return and look again, and one is always rewarded when one spends a little more time before these works.

K.E.W.



Joel Griffith, *Scism Road*, 2003. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches.