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**Also: Mission of Mercy
in Afghanistan**
By Michael Alan Lerner

The Great Art Gap

He Makes Lots of Money. But He'd Like to Earn Some Respect. And He's Not Alone. **By David Ferrell**

Never Mind the High Praise. How About a Little Ink?

His Work Is Priced as High as \$150,000. He's Been Commissioned to Paint by the U.N. But There's No Place in the World of Fine Art for Yuroz and Others Like Him. **By David Ferrell**

On the night he unveiled his first life-size bronze, Yuri Gevorgian seemed more than merely one of the city's great rags-to-riches stories: He seemed a bona fide giant in the world of art. The once-homeless painter and sculptor—who signs his work “Yuroz”—was a grinning, engaging focal point of attention among 100 wealthy collectors and dealers who gathered at his series of lofts in Los Angeles' downtown Artist District.

Guests sampled wine, ceviche and spring rolls, and were effusive about Yuroz's boldly colored, often-erotic oils—paintings with lush contours, sweetly upturned faces and harlequin patterns reminiscent of early Picasso.

A woman named Michelle Neild talked of a personal art collection consisting of Picasso, Miró, Chagall, Matisse and her No. 1 favorite, Yuroz: “Nothing comes close to Yuroz in my opinion.” Another admirer, Steve Berglas, waved a hand at more than three dozen vibrant pieces hanging in the main showroom. He labeled the psychological themes unsurpassed: “Where do you find an artist who has that breadth?”

Down the hall, in Yuroz's paint-splattered studio, hung a newly finished work that the artist considered his masterpiece: a 16-foot oil canvas of immigrants on packing trunks, the New York City skyline in the distance, all conveyed on a background of burnt-orange and black. The haunting mural was commissioned in 2000 for a series of postage stamps and was destined for the United Nations headquarters in Geneva.

Few who lingered to examine it, or who applauded after Yuroz stepped to a microphone and related his own ordeal as an immigrant, would have guessed that the prolific 45-year-old painter is still, deep down, a frustrated man. Yes, he commands hefty sums—up to \$150,000 for some major works—a source of wealth that has enabled him to live as he chooses. Two years ago, fearing an urban meltdown at the new millennium, he moved his manager-partner, Deborah Murry, and their three children into a six-bedroom ranch home in Camarillo.

Yuroz's disaffection concerns his legacy. Like any artist, he wants to be remembered. But will he? Is it enough that he can paint for the U.N. if he cannot land his work in any of the nation's major museums? Is it enough to

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL KELLEY



Yuroz in his Artist District studio.

produce a substantial body of highly valuable work if he cannot get so much as one important critic to review him? Never mind high praise—just a little ink?

Can a man reach the summit on the shoulders of a narrow group of impassioned followers if the art world as a whole writes him off? Or doesn't notice him at all?

“WHERE AM I STANDING?” YUROZ ASKS RHETORICALLY ON A DAY WHEN WE MEET for lunch in the Artist District. “I don't know that I'm standing anywhere.”

He grows acerbic talking about the gatekeepers who govern the museums of fine art. “If they are in a good mood, they say, ‘This is a good artist, let's have a museum show,’ ” Yuroz says in a thick Armenian accent. “If they are in a [bad] mood, then you're dead meat. They reject you, then you're on the rejected list. Is there frustration? Of course there is frustration. There is a tremendous amount of frustration because of the bureaucratic system in art.”

Art is a squishy subject, offering no objective standards of quality. There is no way to establish for certain that one particular creation—or one particular artist—is better than another. Yet there exists an underlying framework, a sort of invisible scaffolding, that enables these judgments to be made, for they must be made. Museum space is, after all, limited. If art were wholly subjective, even the lowliest sketch artist in Venice would command as many admirers as David Hockney or Joan Miró.

Howard N. Fox, a curator of modern and contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, notes that the art world is vast, multifaceted and free-flowing. It is less a world than a universe characterized “by every sort of creativity you can find. There are, in effect, many art worlds, many audiences—and, far more than that, there are many artists.”

And no god to rule this realm. “If you look at the range of activity,” Fox says, “if you go to all the galleries around town, which is only a small percentage of all the art activity in Los Angeles, you'll realize it's almost a free-for-all. There is not a monolithic controlling body of interest or canon of thought.”

Instead there are networks of curators and museum directors, each looking for pieces that somehow fit an overall mission. For example, some museums covet Western art: Remingtons and the like. Others, such as LACMA, eschew it completely. A curator sees new art in the context of what is already there. Fox cannot calculate how many paintings he might see in a year. He attends hundreds of exhibitions. There are 50 or 60 galleries he visits regularly, and he might hit a dozen on any given Saturday.

On top of that, artists send letters, e-mails, slides, photographs. They also call, inviting him to showings. And they offer Web sites. The blinding diversity of all the work makes it extremely difficult for an unknown artist to stand out. What it takes, besides talent, is often time, a slow water drip that eventually makes an impression.

Fox recalls his discovery of an artist named Lari Pittman, whose reckless, baffling amalgams of abstract and realistic images first drew Fox's attention—but not his enthusiasm—in the mid-1980s. “At first I didn't get it,” Fox says, “and it nagged me.” The second and third times he ran across Pittman's work, the name began to stick in Fox's mind. But it took a full decade before Fox staged a museum exhibit of the art.

“It's not this sudden epiphany,” he says. “It's not like walking into Schwab's and there's . . . suddenly another superstar.”

In art, a track record matters. Behind a painting on the wall hangs all of the other paintings an artist has done. Though idle browsers may never see it or think about it, the prior work provides context, shows the line of the artist's growth and establishes his or her place in the evolving art universe.

Of course, no track record exists free of other influences. The gatekeepers who interpret those track records also are subject to the tidal pull of marketing, politics and certain biases that are ingrained in the art establishment. These often involve a deep schism between artists exalted as true creative visionaries and those dismissed as commercial hacks.

One of the raps against Yuroz, I learn, is that he ventured down the path of commercialism early on, selling limited editions and serigraphs, showing his work at expos where the fine artists rarely go. That is enough to be all but blackballed by prestigious galleries and museums that see themselves as the guardians of culture.

“You know what it is? It's snobbery,” says Liz Derringer, a New York publicist and art agent who worked with Yuroz when he was commissioned for the U.N. mural. “You look at a lot of these [fine] artists and they're great. Warhol, Lichtenstein . . . they're fantastic. But are they better than Peter Max? Are they better than Yuroz? Lichtenstein was doing comic books. Warhol was doing soup cans. They got involved with the right people. They got involved with galleries known for esoteric, eccentric art. They had these dealers who made them stars.”

Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein are examples of rare, transcendent individuals who managed to bridge the worlds of commercial art and fine art. But that was not by accident or solely because of the marketing forces behind them, says Christopher Knight, the art critic for the Los Angeles Times. What separates an elite artist such as Warhol from an artist of lesser importance such as Max is the willingness to engage in the creative issues of the time, to take part in what Knight describes as an ongoing dialogue with other artists, curators and critics.

Warhol's famous design of the Campbell's soup can was more than facile illustration. It was a subtle commentary on the prevailing theme of the 1950s and 1960s—that Abstract Expressionism had become the most sophisticated form of American art. Warhol's design incorporates “rectangular zones of color hovering in space,” similar to those employed by famed Expressionist Mark Rothko,

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Knight says. The medium—a soup can—was a nod to the revolutionary vision of Jackson Pollock.

“The slang term for sloshing paint on canvas . . . was ‘soup,’” Knight explains. “So Andy painted soup.”

At any moment fine artists are addressing an array of creative issues. “They're all conscious of what that discourse is. It's complicated, but it's real, it exists,” Knight says. “Then there are artists who pay no attention. They're the ones who are not taken seriously.”

Hilton Brown, an artist and art professor at the University of Delaware who also serves as a consultant to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., agrees but criticizes such thinking. “There is a real problem,” he says, because it ostracizes artists for choosing to go their own ways. An artist, however talented, who remains outside the prevailing dialogue virtually ensures that his work will be ignored.

“It has nothing to do, ultimately, with talent,” Brown says. “The dialogue . . . [determines] whether you're seen as an artist.”

Yes, some who followed the path laid out by the art establishment did achieve lasting greatness. But there are others, Brown adds, including Expressionists Clyfford Still and Mark Tobey, who appear in retrospect to have been overrated, more fashion than substance. Although the works of Still and Tobey still command impressive prices, they are perhaps no better than some artists who followed their own visions into obscurity.

Yuroz sees no sense in trying to become part of an “artificially created” interaction. “Art is not a trend that comes and goes,” he says. “It's a timeless thing. The unfortunate part is, they take something so unsubstantial and make the statement, ‘If you're not part of that, you're not fine art. If you're not in tune with them, it's not fine art.’ That's the most ridiculous statement I've ever heard.”

He recalls trying to show his work at a fine arts exhibition in Chicago. “We sent them slides. They turned us down, saying we are a commercial art.” It was such a slap that he attended anyway, as a spectator, just to see what met the lofty criteria for display. Yuroz says he did observe some beautiful sculptures. But then: “I see skateboards, painted. Skateboards hanging on the wall—five skateboards—and each one they're selling for \$25,000.”

There are two well-known art exhibitions every winter in New York City. One, at the Armory, draws the so-called fine artists, Derringer explains. The other, at the Jacob Javits Center, attracts the commercial stripe. “It's a different crowd, a different audience,” she says. “It's like music—a different crowd is going to go see Sting versus Bon Jovi.”

Yuroz shows at the Javits. His presence there the past 14 years all but disqualifies him from being invited to the Armory, says Murry, who also is his agent. “We're not invited to [the Armory],” she says. “We can't get in.” It might have been wise to stop attending the Javits show eight or 10 years ago if Yuroz wanted to enter the more elite Armory circle, but the cost in sales would have been enormous, Murry says.

“Yuri has such a huge following [at the Javits],” she says. “We recognize the fact

David Ferrell is a Times staff writer.

we probably don't belong there anymore. But it's still, financially, probably the No. 1 show in the world.”

Yuroz has appeared more than once on the New York morning television talk shows. He comes across well, with mirthful black eyes and a crescent-moon smile that seems too large for his face. He is a natural showman who loves people. At expos, he dips into a bag of marking pens to scrawl drawings and signatures on the T-shirts, neckties and blouses of his fans.

“He gives so freely,” says collector Chris Schran, who has seen more than a dozen autograph seekers in line. “He works from the heart, not the pocketbook.”

But Yuroz has defied the unwritten laws of the fine arts world by being a tireless self-promoter and making his art, through serigraphs, drawings and limited editions, available to all income ranges. He has made headlines—and, pre-

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sumably, sold more work—by drawing elaborate human figures on the walls of hotel suites. It galls him to hear that he should reduce his prolific output—hundreds of works a year—and make himself more reclusive, more mysterious so as to win entree into art's upper echelons.

“Artists have the right to make a living,” he says. “Lots of dealers, lots of curators don't like that. There are some kinds of borders they create and they judge people. There are so many politics, so many games to play. It's a waste of time to kiss somebody's behind, to play these games when I can sit down and paint.”

I FIRST MET YUROZ IN 1992 WHILE WRITING ABOUT THE DISPARATE LIVES OF truckers, prostitutes and the homeless in the swath of downtown east of the high-rises and west of the L.A. River—a bleak expanse of warehouses and razor wire.

An art colony took root here many years ago and continues to survive, like a patch of lichen on the permafrost. I wandered one day into the gated sanctuary of Yuroz's building. There I found one artist who created canvases so huge he had to hang them from high riggings before splashing them with colors. Another fashioned 4-foot polystyrene orchids, dozens of caricature blooms.

Climbing the metal stairs, I found Yuroz's loft and encountered languid lovers on black canvas, moods and simple arcs of striking elegance. “Wow,” said the photographer who was with me as we met the artist for the first time. “You are really good at what you do.”

He had been something of a prodigy, only 10 when he entered art school in Soviet Armenia. Yuroz later studied at the Yerevan University of Art and Architecture and, for a time, supported himself by designing women's clothes—outfits that were sewn by his girlfriend, Rose. He combined their names phonetically, forming “Yuroz,” and kept the moniker after seeking his freedom and immigrating to America in 1985. If he used his Russian name, he says, people would look for the Russian influence in his work. He likes that Yuroz has no race, religion or culture connected to it.

His arrival in Los Angeles brought him an artist's full measure of suffering: He slept on the streets and in a Greyhound depot. He toiled as a carpenter and pizza deliveryman while working on his English. He painted mostly at night. It took him three years to sell his first oil.

A rumpled mattress occupied the floor of his studio. One evening, as we sat nearby sipping wine and discussing his life, he explained how he both slept and worked in this large, cluttered room, his mind filled with artistic visions. An inspiration would hit and he would drive himself for four or five days, catnapping or forgoing sleep until at last his canvas was done. “The biggest ecstasy you can have in your life,” he terms this frenzy of creation—a rush greater than sex.

He was already on a commercial track. He met the glib, hard-charging Deborah Murry in 1987 while she was running a gallery in Beverly Hills. She took on his paintings and moved in with Yuroz a year later. Murry immediately closed her shop and set out to bring Yuroz's art to the world.

“We sold to everybody and anybody walking,” she says. “We were in 153 galleries and frame shops all over the country, in Japan, everywhere.” Yuroz was an overnight success—commercially. Eight hundred people came to the first show. Every piece of art was sold.

Yuroz's résumé grew to include many small brushes with fame. He designed art for the Grammy Awards—figures encircling an old gramophone, floating on a blue-black *Continued on Page 30*



Buffalo tartare with mustardy aioli, capers, chopped egg and onions.

elk with Jerusalem artichokes.

Inevitably, some diners aren't as enamored of game as others. The chef has solved that nicely with a respectable Liberty duck breast or, even more mainstream, a grilled Black Angus steak. The filet is paired with caramelized Maui onions and a terrific potato galette. However, the night I try it, the steak is so tender, or tenderized, that it's somewhat mushy. Saddle Peak also offers a couple of fish dishes, too.

Less successful are the homemade ravioli stuffed with butternut squash in brown sage butter: The plate of pasta is simply too rich and greasy. And a farm-raised pheasant breast is dry and so muted that it registers at the bottom of the flavor scale.

Each season Schwartz designs a tasting menu. Winter's begins with two plump sea scallops, seared just on one side. The rabbit is too dry, but buffalo "on the range" cooked rare is a compelling argument for the frontier meat. Beautifully lean, with a clean flavor, it could be the coming thing now that media magnate Ted Turner, who has the largest herd of bison in America, is opening a restaurant chain featuring 25 versions of the bison burger.

Saddle Peak has updated the pastry selection as well. That tasting menu ended with a lovely individual Meyer lemon tart topped with a cloud of softly whipped, unsweetened cream strewn with lemon peel. There's a creamy and cold lavender crème brûlée, and sometimes a warm strawberry tart with black pepper and a balsamic reduction. Which is not so strange, considering that Italians like to eat strawberries with a few drops of aged *aceto balsamico*.

It's heartening to see a classic L.A. restaurant renewed. This is one well worth the detour. Just remember the way home. <

AMBIENCE: Romantic stone hunting lodge with game trophies, massive fireplace, hurricane lanterns and wicker armchairs. **SERVICE:** Crisp and professional. **BEST DISHES:** Buffalo tartare, butternut squash soup, wild mushrooms in puff pastry, venison rack, roasted elk tenderloin, lemon tart. **Appetizers,** \$11 to \$28. **Main courses,** \$24 to \$36. **Four-course tasting menu,** \$59; with wines, \$79 per person. **Corkage,** \$15. **WINE PICKS:** 1999 J. Rochioli Estate Pinot Noir, Sonoma County; 1999 Cupe Syrah Bien Nacido Hillside Reserve, Central Coast. **FACTS:** Dinner Wednesday through Sunday. Sunday brunch. Valet parking.

Solution To This Week's Puzzle:
"A Pronounced Difference"

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Yuroz

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background. He has done pieces for the Suzuki Rock 'N Roll Marathon in San Diego. He's been written up by newspapers in Cleveland, Miami, Seattle. But museum exhibitions have been few and, literally, far between: in Anchorage, in the Fuller Arts Museum in Boston, and in a wing of St. Bonaventure University's Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts in upstate New York. That show in particular delighted him because the curator, a Franciscan monk, chose to display the erotic works.

But the commercial tag clearly haunts Yuroz. Murry has pulled Yuroz's work from all but a few galleries. "We're in 18 worldwide right now," she says, and in none in Los Angeles. Her own reputation may hamper his acceptance by the powers that be. "I'm a blabbermouth, I don't live by their code," she says. "I'm not part of that group. Honestly, for Yuri to reach the next level, he needs a new agent."

Yuroz will not have that. But there are innumerable examples of great and not-so-great artists who crafted the right image with sagacious help from behind the scenes. Consider the class of conceptual artists who emerged in New York in the last half century: they made us see the landscape differently.

They piled candy in a corner and called it art. They dared to play with our minds, creating patterns and objects as

non-art as they could get—and branding it art. It was art by the mere fact of its nonconformity—it was, even before the term, thinking outside the box—and the media age embraced it.

The movement was so groundbreaking that today's critics continue to use it as a reference point. Yuroz himself keeps a videotape documentary of the New York art scene as it existed from 1940 to 1970—an intellectual round-table that features Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rothko, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Jackson Pollack and Willem de Kooning. Some who were part of that sphere cynically acknowledged the role of influential agents and dealers in making them valuable commodities. Johns, for example, once heard that famed dealer Leo Castelli could take two beer cans and sell them as art—a speculation that Johns himself tested. He mounted a pair of cans as sculpture and Castelli promptly made the sale.

No one would assail the important work done by Johns, but the dubious forms of self-expression by countless other iconoclasts such as Julian Schnabel and Franz Kline have given many of today's artists pause—perhaps rightly so.

"Artists are very frustrated by the way the whole system works," says Rom Romulus Yáari, a contemporary painter who lives downtown. "You go to a modern art museum and you see a string hanging from the middle of a canvas, and it sells for \$300,000—and you wonder why. What makes this fine art? Who decided this was fine art?"

Hal Nelson, director of the Long Beach Museum of Art, candidly acknowledges that luck and "big-old marketing machines" have propelled many artists to fame, though some later crashed like Nasdaq stocks. A case in point is Schnabel, whose career took off in the 1980s behind the marketing exploits of noted dealer Mary Boone. Schnabel worked with shattered plates—fragments that he stuck onto canvases with thick paint, creating loosely composed images that were generally recognizable in some way.

"He became world-renowned," Nelson says. "He was in all the major museum collections." Boone's reputation clearly carried him. "She was seen to be a dealer who had her pulse on the newest, freshest artists, the person who brought these new artists to the fore."

Schnabel's art became extremely valuable, but only for a time. "He fell fat," Nelson says. "But he's still in many collections."

DURING MY RESEARCH, I TOUR MOCA at the Geffen Contemporary, the annex of the Museum of Contempo-

rary Art in Little Tokyo. Among the works on display: a fried egg on a wood table. A pair of worn boots on a pedestal. Wrapped chocolates in a corner. Christmas lights lying across a hardwood floor. Elephant dung arranged on canvas. A big cube of lard left slowly melting.

MOCA's chief curator, Paul Schimmel, says most artists selected for the museum have proven track records. "We've shown, on occasion, artists who have had insignificant exhibition histories," but those exceptions are rare. "It's very hard on a young artist [to be showcased] in an institution as big and as visible as MOCA. It can sometimes be crushing."

A lot of artists never break through until they reach 40 or beyond, though the threshold is becoming younger. What's most important, he says, is having an original vision, a voice that belongs to no one else.

"Originality, that's what it comes down to. It absolutely tops the list, before issues of craft or execution or intellectual rigor," Schimmel says. "People are always saying, 'My son could do a Jackson Pollack.' It's true. I could do a Jackson Pollack. It doesn't mean anything. The question is, 'Could you have done a Jackson Pollack in 1948?' He worked at it. There was nothing for him to copy. He understood the implications of what he was doing."

Which makes me wonder: Is Yuroz original enough?

He does more than paint. For several years, beginning in 1994, he worked with ceramics. He does pencil drawings. He does bronze sculptures; he completed one table-size work a year for four years before creating his life-size rendition of two serene lovers, "A Delicate Balance."

Nearly all of the works—paintings and sculptures—are sensual, and many share recurring symbols: roses and pomegranates. The 17-inch version of "A Delicate Balance" is listed for \$18,000; the larger piece, produced in limited castings, is priced three times higher. At its unveiling party, I run into an art collector who sees a failure of creativity on Yuroz's part. To her, the oval faces, ponderous limbs and harlequin patterns rightly belong to someone else.

"That's early Picasso," says Barbara Sternig, a collector of abstracts for 20 years, as she studies a bronze called "Together in Time" (a man and woman draped around a guitar) in Yuroz's showroom. "He's extremely derivative of Picasso."

Yuroz concedes Picasso's influence—and also Matisse's—but says there is nothing wrong with emulating a style you love. "Something gets under your

skin. It's in your work," he says—but it evolves, you make it distinct. "If you have something to say, eventually you end up saying your own."

Crossing from the commercial realm to the sphere of fine art is difficult enough, but it is all the harder without work that is fresh. Whether Yuroz's work is sufficiently distinctive is a subjective question. The United Nations has been tapping well-known artists for many years to create a continuing line of special commemorative stamps. Officials there reviewed hundreds of names and portfolios before selecting Yuroz to illustrate 2000's chosen theme, immigration.

"His work is stunning," says Tony Fouracre, chief of the U.N. Postal Administration. "The canvas is absolutely fantastic."

But none of this translates into critical acclaim. Yuroz covers the hurt by saying his spirit, his angel inspires him only to paint and sculpt—and if it is appreciated, fine. Then he talks about building his own museum to showcase the work he so strongly believes in. "It was only 120 years ago," he says, "that Van Gogh was trying to sell his paintings, his masterpieces . . . and he never could sell anything. Suddenly he's in the fine art museums. They pay \$72 million. Does that mean that people, over 100 years later, became so smart?"

We walk together through MOCA's main hall where part of the permanent collection showcases those masters who transformed modern art in the 1950s and 1960s: Rauschenberg, Pollack, Rothko, Robert Moskowitz. Yuroz pauses, thinking before the vast paint-splash of a Pollack—"People go madly, incredibly in love with this"—and admires the aesthetic harmonies evident in works by Anthony Tapies and Arshile Gorky.

Wall signs quote various artists. Franz Kline is one: "Sometimes you do have a definite idea about what you're doing, and at other times it all just seems to disappear." The room is filled with Kline's stark canvases, various patterns of black bands crisscrossing backgrounds of white. Yuroz examines them in turn. He scowls. I ask how long it might take him to create one of these.

"A half hour, maybe. Maximum. But it's not even the time—" He seems agitated, then depressed. "To me, the whole room is very cold and empty. I feel such an emptiness walking through here."

We walk the empty gallery in silence, then he laughs, his eyes growing mischievous again. He has been thinking about Kline's quote on the wall.

"His ideas disappeared, and that's why he [was] doing this." ■

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