Galleries are best place to learn about art, artists

By DAVE HICKEY Star-Telegram Art Edito

might be growing up. I don't want to raise false hopes, but I used to think talking about art to Texans was a fool's errand — like talking about your mistress to your wife. Since then, however, I have tried tried talking about Texas to art types, and, given a choice of windmills, I decided to take a shot at bestowing knowledge on my innocent, but intelligent fellow Texans. My chances of bestowing intelligence on art hipsters was certainly

Now art hipsters are asking solicitous questions about writing for the "lay reader." In response, I point out that I am a lay writer, reminding them that, unlike sex, art is not a religion for me—only a game: serious play, but dead serious, nevertheless. But there's a lot they don't tell you about this kind of fun for mortal stakes, and a lot

they never tell you, so I had hoped to explain the rules to at least one of my potential readers.

He's the one I know best: Me, 20-odd years ago, the last time I lived in Fort Worth, when I threw this paper rather than writing for it and found myself interested in art and not knowing what to do about it. My background is too typical to be unique, so I had hoped to deal with some things I would have liked to have known for the other me's out there.

Maybe they, too, in response to their first tentative overtures, have been given to understand that one pursues cultural interests in a university or a museum, and, like myself, don't find the prospect inviting, even taking into account their myriad art opportunities. In my case, like any libidinous street child I had my priorities in or-

der. My questions prepared:
"Can I be interested in art and not be a Sissy? Or worse, a Dork? Or even worse: A Wimp?"

THE ANSWER UNDER the circumstances was "No," as long as culture was only available via schools. There was a whole world out there sur--rounding the serious commerical art world, but we didn't know about it. We didn't even know that we could go into commercial galleries. People entered the arts from our part of the middle class the way people used to enter the foreign legion, in flight and shame. The only thing we had in common with one another was contempt for algebra and ineptitude at commerce. Gallery girls scared us. How were we to know they were only neurotics in transit from Bennington to Bellvue?

Istill would be of this opinion if I hadn't started hanging around the galleries in Midtown Manhatten five years later during my "street life phase." To be perfectly honest, I was first and foremost interested in their air conditioning and free toilet facilities, but sometime during a hot July afternoon I was chatting with the guys at Sidney Janis, and more to amuse themselves than anything else, they started to bring out paintings. Ellsworth Kellys! One after another, just to look at them. I got so excited I asked to see some Wesslemans. Out they came. I was stunned. Pan-

Then, later that month I was involved in the same sort of loitering at Leo Castelli's uptown gallery and I found myself watching Leo flogg-ing an Artshwager off on a lady from Los Angeiles. My response was simple: "I wanna do that." And eventually I did. And I learned what dealers know, and you should too:

Dealers know that there are no stupid ques tions about art, only people too stupid to ask them. And they know that you don't learn anything in college, regardless of what curators might think. You learn about art by experiencing it and thinking about your responses, by being wrongalot. But you do get better, dealers know.

They also know that no reputation is forever, and that some reputations never happen at all regardless of the quality of the work, that the race is not always to the swift as the good book says. And that an artist who works for 20 years only to marry the beautician and fall under a truck, might be as good as the latest art star.

Dealers also know that you got to see the work and learn to make judgments before you buy it. So they'll show you anything. If they won't they're just picture floggers.

I WISH I HAD known this before but, knowing, I decided I'd check it out again. So in the last couple of weeks, just by hanging around commerical galleries (with an occasional muse-um or artist's studio thrown in), I've probably seen more individual works of art than even existedin, say, 1600. I started here in town, and my visits to Bill and Pam Campbell's Gallery One, and Dutch Phillips' Fort Worth Gallery served to remind me how much I enjoyed this kind of art prospecting.

For no particular reason, I drove over to Dallas and really fell into the rhythm, visiting, in no particular order, Carol Taylor, Delahunty, 500 Exposition and Mattingly Baker. Then, this we end, (taking advantage of a museum show in Houston which required my on-the-scene contempt), I visited the galleries there: Starting off at Betty Moody's with sausage-and-biscuits and a drop-in by Houston artrist Dick Wray, detouring through the executive deco of the DuBose and the Kauffman Gallery. (As sure as you don't touch bases you miss something.) I finished the morning looking at "everything" in Bill Graham's gallery-cum-garage apartment, all of which reflected his taste and involvement his small stable of artists.

The afternoon was foreshortened by "art-forthe sake-of-curatorial ambition," but I still managed to ransack Watson-De Nagy and Hadler-Rodriguiz. Everywhere I went, I looked at anything they'd show me, and took my time doing it; but nobody really minded. Naturally not, you say, since I'm now an "official" critic. Surprisingly, however, they hadn't minded be-fore I was an official critic — when I was just an ex-dealer with no money.

Dealers like talking about art. They like looking at it, too, in varigated company, knowing that, no matter how often they've seen it, in different

company, it will be a different work.

In fact, I entered the art world as a dealer, because I thought galleries were the best places to look at art. (They are, after all, private, and quiet, and well-lighted; and empty in the afternoons. There are no guards, and there are no pop quizzes afterwards.) Also, I fould dealers, especially those involved with the careers of living artists, the subtlest and most worldly critics, and I still do. He usually likes what he shows, even understands it in most cases. Although, if he doesn't, it doesn't bother him. He will eventually. His job is to believe in it, and to sell it.

AND WHETHER he understands it or not, he still likes talking about it . . with anyone strangers off the street, the meter man, even other dealers. Pretty light stuff sometimes, but when I finally disengaged myself, I realized that none of my conversations or correspondence about art with critics, or curators, or academics, even approximated the special quality of my conversations with other dealers. From their multi-faceted mixture of seriousness, irony, gossip, analysis, humor, economics and respect for the artist. I had been able to derive my clearest vision of his task and his role in America's day-to-

It's a real pity people look down their noses at commercial art galleries. The people who run them provide the art world with its absolute front line of reconnaissance and engagement; they also provide a street entrance to an increasingly remote American sub-culture. Translatred into "layman's language" this means that if you find a gallery you like and hang around in the afternoon, they'll show you stuff, and answer your dumb questions. I promise. They even told me how to pronounce Ed Ruscha

Producing musical from the writer's side

reporter and columnist for The New York says. Times, found himself in the middle of one of the most colorful stories of his career. He had written the book for a Broadway musical that opened out of town and was in deep trouble. Like countless Broadway authors before him, Baker went to work day after day feverishly rewriting the iournalistic insti icts took over. He recorded all the gory details of the experience

book form, but his collaborators on the musical eled on himself
—Cy Coleman, the composer, and Barbara Fried, be a journalist.

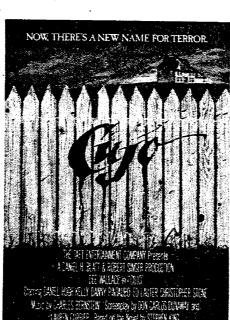
the lyricist - had other ideas. "We convinced NEW YORK — Four years ago, Russell Baker, Russell it would be better to do a show," Coleman

And so, a show it is. Baker, Coleman and Fried have written a new musical, as vet untitled. which tells the story of a frenzied attempt to put on a Broadway musical. The show in the musical happens to be the show that collapsed out of show. But at night, in the solitude of his Toronto town. At first it was called Home Again, but it was retitled Home Again, Home Again by a producer who said it needed a "funnier" title. The entire story of the new musical is told Baker intended to have the diary published in through the eyes of a character Baker has modeook form, but his collaborators on the musical eled on himself—a librettist who also happens to





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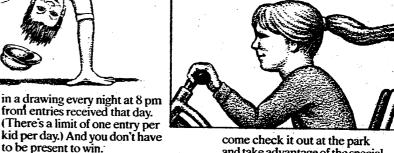
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