

By Howard Smith



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Chasing Shadows

Who knows what evil lurks on the walls of men? The Shadow Artist does. Although I tracked down and talked on the phone three weeks ago with the painter who's been painting those startling black, life-size, assailantlike figures on scores of out-of-the-way walls, at this time, conceptualist culprit Richard Hambleton doesn't really want to make a statement of purpose or even give out any significant details. In fact Hambleton, famed street artist, barely admitted he created them, notwithstanding the telltale evidence—which was pointed out to him—of the same work on canvas for all to see in the current exhibition at the Milliken Gallery. Since the personnel there were happy to acknowledge the obvious connection he could hardly deny it.

At first I felt this image-bandit was refusing to be interviewed in order to build up his personal mystery. The shadow man's already caused considerable speculation, not to mention dozens of calls to the Scenes office for information. Journalism is an essential way to get at meaning. Richard, paranoid at being misunderstood, made a strong case in the opposite direction. His project won't be fully completed until the end of August. (It began November '81.) When it's finished, he explained, he'll be more amenable to answering questions.

I don't like it, but I feel his is a fair position as long as he doesn't permanently retreat into silence. Since his painted figures have made such an impact on the many thousands who have seen them, often with the flash fear of being mugged, eventual psycho/socio-decoding would be in order. Hambleton has proved to be emotionally effective at what he does. He haunts the moving mind of the pedestrian, unlike most other similar practitioners who, when they do art on the street, make about as much sense as selling refrigerators in Leo Castelli's.

You might remember another impressive outdoor series Richard did in New York between 1976 and '78. Sprawled human outlines, like those the police chalk around dead people, were carefully painted on sidewalks, seemingly hundreds, active, scary, and highly visible. For quite a while they were the most talked-about art in New York.

Next time Hambleton appears in this column, I hope he explains to Scenes readers exactly what he's up to with his curious black figures. Also his explanation of the aesthetics of the streets versus the gallery.

Semi-unrelated thought: Conceptual Art is born when a painter looks at a canvas in his studio and gets nauseous.