

THE BLODGETS

is saturated with blatantly sexual images that have been combined with depictions of sacred national events, most book stores refused to carry it. So Cockrill/Judge Hughes plastered billboard size images from the book on downtown buildings.

This year's exhibition—"Family Life: The Postwar Years"—broke new ground in its unfettered depiction and analysis of life in the American home.

While the artists and their work received much popular attention, the critics were neither impressed nor amused. Cockrill/Judge Hughes' artwork has been maligned as "aggressively stupid...lousy painting that conflates adolescent nihilism with political consciousness..." (*Village Voice*). More frequently the critics have attacked the artists personally as "twisted creeps...big assholes," (*The Paper*) with "shock effect their only talent" (*The New York Times*). All seem in agreement that the art team has "an uncontested claim to be the most vulgar artists in New York today" (*East Village Eye*). What do the artists have to say?

HIGH TIMES: Has any critic given you a positive review?

Cockrill: No. The gallery system and the critical system are trying as hard as they can to keep art from moving forward at too swift a pace. Only fast enough to keep it entertaining but never so fast that it becomes troubling. When our ad in *Artforum* (with a reproduction from *Family Life*) came out people cancelled their subscriptions. If you allowed free expression in the art world it would create anarchy and that would threaten the gallery and museum systems.

HIGH TIMES: How does the middle class—which is the subject of your work and from which you came—see your paintings?

Cockrill: They're the ones who respond the most enthusiastically. The only ones who resent it are the New York intellectuals. Too frequently artists are middle class people who pretend they don't have middle class ideas.

Hughes: The intelligentsia is offended by the middle class and depictions of middle class life.

Cockrill: I think that if these paintings were really full of shit no one would be affected by them. The fact that they have an element of truth in them is why people get affected.

HIGH TIMES: Your graphic depictions of sex certainly push and perhaps shatter accepted standards of propriety. In the "Family Life" exhibition incest—depicted or implied—appears in almost every canvas.

Hughes: Well, everyone has

COCKRILL /HUGHES BACK OF THE U.S.A.

BY MARK MOSKIN

MIKE COCKRILL and JUDGE HUGHES are taxi-driving New York artists with a mission. To question accepted social perceptions and standards.

Cockrill/Judge Hughes' early performances juxtaposed the deaths of John Kennedy and John Lennon. As Cockrill fired a gun at portraits of Kennedy and Lennon the artists led the audience in a sing along rendition of "Let's Shoot Johnny in the Head" to the tune of "The Syncopated Clock."

From this performance came the notorious "comic book" *The White Papers*, which begins with the assassination of JFK, churns through the Manson murders and Viet Nam, and reaches a finale with the shooting of the former Beatle. Because *The White Papers*

naughty ideas. In everyone's mind—looking at these pictures—they remember their own thoughts. In this sense the work is nostalgic. But the incest was not actualized. The pictures are not a real image but an ideal image. The works are painted expressions. Art is a representation of man's subliminal desires.

Cockrill: Incest is a universal obsession. The American family exists because of incest. Without incest you don't have nationalism. Nationalism, political partyism, are incestual. You keep it in the home. If you let outsiders inside you change the genetic strain. So you maintain your power by incestual activity.

HIGH TIMES: So the works are metaphors.

Cockrill: Yes. It's not really about fucking your sister. It's about the inability to mix with other groups and other ideas.

HIGH TIMES: Do you have sympathy for the people depicted in your paintings?

Cockrill: Yes.

Hughes: They are sheep being led to the slaughter. And they don't even know it. They are happy because they're unaware they've fallen from the garden of paradise.

Cockrill: I think the important thing to note is that the people are portrayed sympathetically, that the paintings are primarily happy, that the paintings are radical and funny.

HIGH TIMES: Your works certainly are radical in that they expose the roots of society. Let me read a quotation from Friedrich Engels:

"The artist will have acquitted himself honorably when, by means of an accurate portrait of actual social relations, he will have destroyed the conventional view of the nature of these relations, shattered the optimism of the bourgeois world, and forced the viewer to question the permanency of the prevailing order."

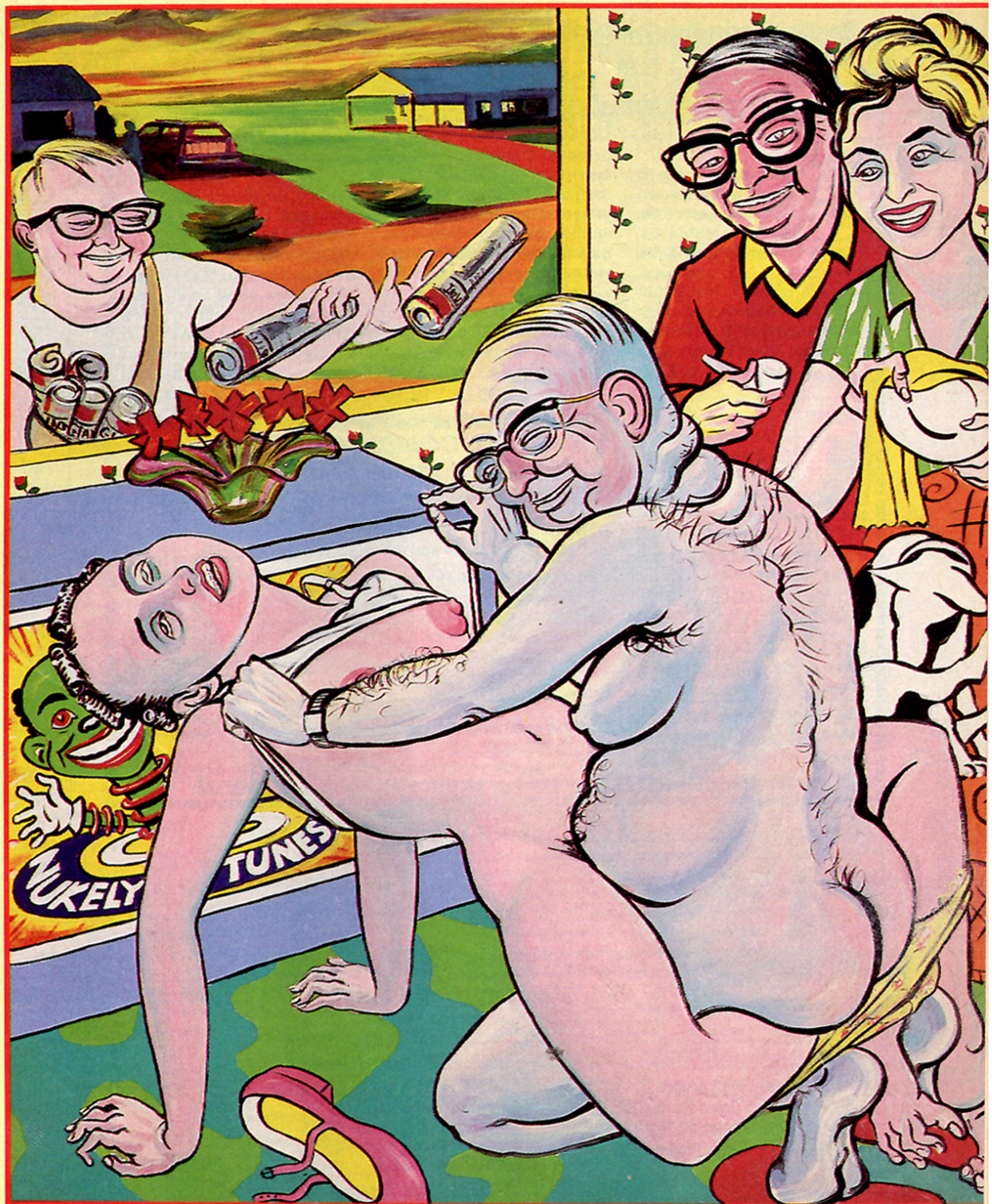
Cockrill: That's exactly what we do—that's what our major function is.

Hughes: The capitalist system will change as a result of the Artists' Union, with which I am involved.

The artists will be at the vanguard of the revolution. If art can't serve a vanguard position it should be destroyed. Its head should be severed and left to wither like the useless capitalist tool that it is.

Cockrill: Perhaps the most radical thing we do is to spend years making paintings that seem to have little chance of being sold.

HIGH TIMES: I agree that your work questions the social foundations. But is it funny? Viewers most often appear taken aback, shocked into silence rather than laughter. Perhaps this occurs because the



paintings have the appearance of being pornographic. According to an attorney who is an expert in this field, your work meets all the requirements for legal classification as pornography.

Cockrill: It does. It meets every level without really being pornographic.

Hughes: It meets every level. But, when you look at each painting, there is something wrong: the men are dirty—they're not desirable.

Cockrill: Or the woman is bored. Somehow the paintings operate as a critique of pornography. It's an analysis of pornography. If you just painted an attractive woman on a couch—that was simply designed to

arouse the viewer—I don't think it would last. You'd look at it once and then throw it away. But you come back to our work because there's a story going on.

We think we are radical feminists. In our work the women are pretty and the men are unattractive. Men are inferior because they are denied reproductive capacity and as such channel their energies into destructive behavior.

Our stuff makes you feel like you'd better re-evaluate your life. It's not supposed to make you go out and have a hot date.

Our paintings make you go home and pray. ●