Chicago Tribune

Tempo

SUNDAY, APRIL 16, 1995

Fleet of dreams

Chronicling Britain's buses ignites Jeremy Dickinson's artistic sensibility

By Brad Webber
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

London painter Jeremy Dickinson is the John James Audubon of the double-decker, chronicler of a field guide to three decades of Britain's omnibuses, motor coaches and assorted livery vehicles.

His 60-odd small renderings of the buses, 16 of which made their way to last year's ArtExpo in Chicago, are enough to give the art world's carriage trade something to buzz about.

The whimsical, pop-art buses attracted Forbes magazine, which mentioned his work in a story about investing in new talents. (Most of the paintings cost $900 each.) The editors of New York magazine also went head over wheels, publicizing his Gotham gallery opening last fall by splashing four of his motley orange and olive green cruisers on its Calendar page.

"I've always been interested in the idea of transportation as fashion," said Dickinson, 31, in a telephone interview from Los Angeles, where he had just wrapped up an exhibition at the Angle Gallery.

The project presented a high-gear challenge: lending glamor to a utilitarian, no-frills object.

"Buses don't really have an aura of style," Dickinson said. "They're very functional objects with elements that have to make sense, such as the doors must be wide enough, for example. I just wanted to do something on a deep level of one aspect of that."

Dickinson's fervent examination of buses began when he went to a meeting of transport enthusiasts a few years ago. The native of Halifax, in Yorkshire, had graduated from London's Goldsmith School of Art, so

SEE BUSES, PAGE 5

London

Chesterfield

Paintings courtesy of Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

Manchester: Fleetline

Cambridge

Of his bus paintings, Jeremy Dickinson says, "I try to make them into something you would want to see close up."

Buses

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

he was well-equipped to craft a catalog of the livery of England's yore. Pretty soon, the creative wheels were turning.

"I use a lot of photographs," he said. "I'm always aware that if I got something wrong they would spot it. I'm very careful about the slope of a window or the size of the radiator. I'm very aware of detail. If I don't get it exactly right, lots of people would notice. ... You can definitely make a connection to his [Audubon's] work."

The chromatic oils on white alkyd bases, painted on canvases about one square foot each, offer a particular *Zeitgeist* of '60s Britain. Time and place converge in his tracings of bus-design changes from 1965 to 1995. "The buses are sitting on this white painted landscape. It's a half-second, abstract environment," he said. Reflected in the windows are highly conceptualized passing scenes.

Structural details abound, yet some side panels and destinations are left vague to keep the focus on the vehicles.

"I like to keep them, well, not really anonymous, but if you put in the destination, it's variable. I try to keep the fleet in a general way. [Advertisements] are a very specific time element. I wanted to be more representative in general."

"Livery History Paintings 1964-94 Leeds" (1994) oil and alkyd on canvas, he said, is "four little paintings of vehicles that operated that route over a 30-year period—my lifespan. I'm intrigued that the design evolved very slowly."

Attention to detail

Coloration and a documentarian's zeal to reproduce the vehicles faithfully is vital. The double-decker Oxford bumbles about in a vivid, cherry red; Manchester's Fleetline in a pumpkin hue; and Reading in subdued cream and regal crimson. Chesterfield reels in banana and blue. The Bradford series is copied in sky blue, with mouthlike grills grinning like Alice's Cheshire cat.

"The impetus for a lot of the paintings is the things you see when you're 4 or 5. In a way, you can identify with the colors you saw during your childhood, just like the colors of a football team's uniform," he said.

"You've got some wild variations: very restrained creams and the deep reds of the 1950s, and the wilder colors later. They are very small-size studies, like a nature artist would paint a book of a species. I try to make them into something you would want to see close up."

"Municipal Network With Short Vehicle History: Bradford (Regent III, Karrier Sunbeam, Regent V, Antlantean)" incorporates four panels with a British government-issue map with traced bus routes. Taken as a whole, the ink squiggles give off an organic aura, emphasizing man's adaptation to topography.

"The mapping [series of] paintings focus on the local identity of communities," Dickinson said. "Maps produced by particular bus operators tend to service a specific area, so you have a certain identity. It's a message about local identity [shown] in the design of the vehicles within the work. It attracts people on a very humorous level, but it has you thinking about locality."

The end of the line

In Los Angeles, the Angle exhibition included works in his grouping titled "The Hulks," a display centering on the demise of buses.

"They're of vehicles being dismantled," Dickinson said. "They really feel quite carcasslike with these strange, skeletal shells. The others are like motor vehicles new in the catalog. You really see a life cycle there."

During his California trek, Dickinson gained some inspiration for an upcoming project much along the same lines, but with a uniquely Yankee feel.

"I went to Barstow in the Monave Desert, to a U.S. Army salvage yard where they buy old L.A. transit buses and sell them to the U.S. Marines for firing practice," he said, noting he photographed them for later use.

Mass transit buses in the U.S. are "interesting in their own way," he said. "In the U.S. there's less variety because of a smaller number of manufacturers. Yet there are vehicles you don't find in Europe."

One of his major objectives is to prod people into taking a new look at objects usually taken for granted.

"You see these in the street all the time. [At the Los Angeles show] I found people staring at the paintings, looking at the things they've seen every day—something that's very menial," Dickinson said. "I think if you focus on anything long enough you can uplift it. Buses are a very menial subject, but they're very memorable."