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## Imagism and Alienation

By PETER PLAGENS

*Roger Brown*

D.C. Moore Gallery

535 W. 22nd St., (212) 247-2111

Through Feb. 2

Of all the Chicago Imagist artists from the 1960s on, Roger Brown (1941-97) has had the most traction outside the Windy City. His paintings aren't as optically difficult as those of Ed Paschke or Karl Wirsum, and they're less hermetic than Jim Nutt's. In fact, Mr. Brown's work—often incorporating cartoonish black silhouettes of men smoking cigarettes and women with late 1940s hairdos tucked inside bright-yellow nighttime skyscraper windows—is almost cuddly by comparison. As a result, it seems we encounter one of his paintings or prints, or a reproduction of one, in just about every gallery neighborhood in the U.S.



Roger Brown/DC Moore Gallery, New York.

Roger Brown's 'Sarajevo the Serbian Way' (1993), at DC Moore

Mr. Brown was also something of a crusader, however, and at times an angry one. His billowy, furrowed fields often comment on environmental pollution, and his deadpan political portraits (e.g., Ronald and Nancy Reagan) evidence a quiet rage against the then-status-quo, particularly concerning AIDS. (Mr. Brown died of the disease.) "Sarajevo the Serbian Way" (1993) puts Mr. Brown's windowed people inside a building being blown apart. "La Cage Aux Folles (Only the Names Are Changed to Protect the Innocent)" (1986) consists of three horizontal vignettes depicting the creation, collection and criticism of Imagist art. Some small hand-printing between the stacked friezes excoriates a critic named "Ellen Artless" (a barely disguised stand-in for longtime Chicago art critic Allan Artner) for trying to warn

off young artists from the temptations of Imagism, and for allegedly implying that the style's continued success in Chicago comes from a collusion of slick dealers and wealthy Jews (a painting is being sold to an Orthodox man with *peyos*).

Nevertheless, Mr. Brown's huggable-with-a-barb paintings are so graphically succinct and elegantly colored (little fires of red and yellow against lots and lots of cold black and gray) that this museum-quality show just might merit a checklist that, curiously, lists several paintings as for "Museum sale only."