

# BITTERSWEET VIEWS OF AMERICANA

Recently, a critic referred to painter John Tweddle of San Antonio as a "true naif" and went on to explain that, despite years of working within the system of the art world, Tweddle has retained a kind of innocence that is rare. Tweddle is not a primitive, since he has crossed the barriers into the currents of contemporary art and is educated and aware of the concerns of artists today. But he is a man who has retained his romantic ties to his humble beginnings.

Tweddle's roots are in the country and on the open road, but his life is in his studio. Since the late 1960s, he has sold major paintings to important collectors and institutions. In 1983, one of his works was acquired by the Twentieth Century Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Some 36 paintings and 2,600 drawings by Tweddle remain in the estate of the notorious Robert Scull, one of the greatest collectors of the pop art movement. Today, Tweddle is represented in this state by Houston's Texas Gallery.

Even from one painting, it is easy to see that Tweddle is an extraordinary draftsman, and a look back at his early sketches from high school shows him educating himself in all the subtleties of light and shadow as well as the intricacies of the human form and the flow of the natural landscape. Today, although he works with a kind of fast-and-furious brushwork that often makes the work seem utterly spontaneous, Tweddle also maintains control over his subjects and the structural order of his compositions.

Tweddle is a romantic, and his art represents a kind of idealism that many would have thought lost with the close of the 19th century. Although his subjects sometimes are

by susan freudenheim



San Antonio painter John Tweddle sees both pleasure and pain in American themes such as trucks, money-mongers, modern-day cowboys and rodeos. Among his bittersweet tributes: "Rodeo Clown" (1984/85; 58" x 35").



Tweddle's "God Provides, Trucks Deliver" (1983/85; 67" x 97") symbolizes the freedom and challenge of the open road.

the same as those of contemporary Western artists, he is never overcome by the heritage of Frederic Remington or Charles Russell. Tweddle's vision is more current, a romance with the modern-day cowboy, and his bittersweet pictures are filled with rows of 18-wheelers speeding across the open road or rodeo cowboys

passing through an open range where the quiet has been rudely interrupted by a jet flying overhead. The paintings are extremely colorful, often to the point of seeming cartoon-like, but their lighthearted manner is subdued by an element of pathos.

The paintings are more autobiographical than they might initially

seem. But Tweddle's life story reads like one of those bizarre roller-coaster success stories that occur more often in the country music business than in the hoity-toity world of painting and sculpture.

He was born in 1938 in a hillbilly town in rural Kentucky called Pickneyville, where the population of 50 relied on his family's front-room grocery store for supplies. Tweddle's father was a trucker, out on the road for months at a time, and his mother took charge of the education and livelihood of her four children.

The vision of his father's truck was always all-important. Naturally, Tweddle's feelings toward the image of the truck are not all benign. "I saw a truck as something that took my father away from me," he remembers, "but it was also something that brought him back. I used to climb into the cab as a child and play with all the gears."

"We once spent three months living in a truck when business was really bad," Tweddle adds. "It was a crazy time, with the whole family, all four kids, jammed into the cab. It

gave me a real insecure feeling.”

But the truck is much more to Tweddle than simply a symbol of his childhood. “Everything moves on trucks in America,” he says. “It’s a real symbol of power and transportation. Even though I knew about my father’s experience, when I was a kid I always wanted to be a truck driver. I thought it would be romantic driving on the open road in a big machine. I even tried it for a while, and I got over the dream real quickly. Still, there’s a romance for me in the idea.”

Tweddle began to draw as a small child, taking refuge in copying images he’d seen in magazines and books. “I started by using the drawings as an escape mechanism,” he says, “but I soon realized that I could get a lot of attention through them, from the other kids at school for drawing pictures of naked women and from the teachers for drawing realistic pictures of birds.”

Tweddle spent a brief time studying art at the Kansas City Art Institute, but the discipline he imposed on himself of looking at magazines and drawing constantly was much more



JAMES MCKINNIS

*Tweddle makes art that is both folksy and skilled.*

valuable to him. By 1967, Tweddle was married, had two small children and was painting furiously in Atlanta, Georgia, when a New York dealer named Richard Bellamy saw his work. Bellamy’s Green Gallery represented many of the best New York artists of the ’60s, including some of the hot new pop artists such as Roy

Lichtenstein. The rawness of Tweddle’s work caught Bellamy’s eye, and he took Tweddle on. Within the year, his paintings began to sell—James Michener, among others, bought one—and after Tweddle received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, he moved to New York.

But his stay in the hub of the art

world was short-lived. Success had come too fast to this young purist, and Tweddle found all the attention confusing. "I was making a really good living doing what I wanted to do," he says, "but I was unhappy. I got confused about why I was making the paintings, whether it was just for the money or what, and I got really paranoid about the art world. I felt vulnerable, so I left and went out to the country between Taos and Santa Fe, and I hid out, just camping and

hiking. That time in New Mexico was really spiritual for me."

In 1976, Tweddle announced to his dealers (others had gotten interested once the action started) that he was quitting painting. He started a construction business in Oklahoma, remodeling and building homes. But he kept on painting, despite his intentions. The art went to New York's Blum Helman Gallery, and Tweddle stayed put. He painted trucks, women and, more than almost any other

image, dollar signs. He exploited the dollar symbol, which almost always brings up conflicting images of luxury, greed, indebtedness and possibilities of power. Tweddle's own foray into the lifestyle of the rich and famous had left an indelible mark on his psyche, and the sign of the dollar, with its hard and soft edges, became his artistic trademark.

As the symbol is incorporated in the painting, sometimes as a border pattern, sometimes as a large central image, the effect is always powerful, but not always positive. "People are very put off by the dollar signs," Tweddle says, "even in New York, where you'd think they could accept anything. It's hard for people to look at them; they think I'm accusing them of something. But really, I have no intention of pointing a finger at anyone. I see the dollar sign as a symbol of political, economic and sexual power. I see it as a very sexy-looking symbol. I sometimes think the economic system has become today's religion." The dollar sign is the counterpoint to Tweddle's romantic notions.

After the oil slump hit hard in Oklahoma, Tweddle moved to San Antonio two years ago, attracted to the city both because his parents were living there and because he could find the space and flexibility to once again paint full time. So now, Tweddle's focus is again on his work. He is painting prolifically, making trapezoidal and hexagonal canvases that are layered with images of his favorite subjects. Tweddle's idealism still dominates his work, and in his fervid imagination every symbol has its meaning. For Tweddle, a trapezoidal canvas is not just a trapezoid-shaped picture, it's a fantasy of a scene seen through a truck's front windshield, just as a hexagonal canvas represents the form of a trucker's rear-view mirror. The visions Tweddle paints are still as strong as those of his heroes, but he's found his own fictional open road to ride on.