

■ GALLERIES

Colorful, Somber Landscapes

BY KENNETH BAKER

Richard Sheehan's paintings at the Jeremy Stone Gallery (125 Post Street, through Saturday) are uncommonly resonant landscapes. They vibrate both with the artist's fondness for neglected passages of urban space and with understanding of how subject matter creates opportunities for painting.

The landscapes Sheehan paints are mostly street-level voids beneath bridges and between buildings. He renders these architectural dead spots in high contrasts of color and value that describe sensations of bright light and deep shadow. Sheehan pulls his brush strokes taut and silky — and too slick for their own good at times — as Wayne Thiebaud used to do. And his paintings have an abstract strength of composition that suggests admiration for Franz Kline's and Willem De Kooning's nonfigurative paintings of the 1950s.

The quiet and vacancy of the spaces Sheehan paints hint at desolation rather than respite. Despite their sunny colors, the mood of the images is somber, almost as though the settings we see were unworthy of the sunlight that falls around them. The paintings are finally upbeat, however, for being so bracingly well put together.

Lundy Siegriest

Sheehan's show makes an interesting contrast to the work of the late Lundy Siegriest (1925-1985) at the Charles Campbell Gallery (647 Chestnut Street, through April 4). Siegriest's paintings, with a few exceptions, are landscapes of the California countryside, mostly in Marin County. They make Sheehan's work look "professional" and East Coast, which it is, and leave you wondering whether Sheehan works from direct observation. In fact, he does.

Siegriest liked to paint outdoors and frequently keyed his palette almost to a Fauvist pitch. His pictures have the intimate scale and laconic notation we associate with the plein-air tradition. They describe patches of terrain — buildings, trees and all — with summary, unpretentious directness.

Farrar Wilson

Farrar Wilson's paintings at the Breckenridge Gallery (545 Sutter Street, through March 28) are plainly in the lineage of Abstract Expressionism. Wilson faces the difficulty of working in a recognizably outmoded style without looking like he's backtracking or merely plundering his sources. His paint-handling is agitated, but it looks methodical rather than heartfelt. The result is paintings that perpetuate stylistic licks of Abstract Expressionism stripped of their signifying quality. What keeps his work from looking merely derivative is his eye for color.

Wilson works his surfaces heavily, though they never lose their improvised look. He uses freely drawn squares and diagonals to give bones to the pictorial field, bringing Richard Diebenkorn to mind. These geometric elements provide armatures for color.

Color seems to be Wilson's real interest. He handles dark blues and violets to good effect, injecting them with occasional bursts of garish pink, acid yellow or turquoise. Wilson's painting is assured enough in its own terms, yet it looks like a holding action, a kind of work that can be carried on almost habitually until something in it really comes into focus.

Jose Maria Sicilia

Something similar might be said about the work of Spanish painter Jose Maria Sicilia, at the Janet Steinberg Gallery (345 Sutter Street, through March 28).

The strong point of Sicilia's work is that each picture has a distinct physical format. He likes to abut several canvases to compose a single work. This process of carrying composition beyond the level of

painterly gesture to that of objective structure has become something of a cliché among younger painters in the 1980s, but Sicilia succeeds in making each new work look like a fresh start.

Sicilia heaps his canvases with acrylic, letting the overloaded paint crack, and sometimes giving his surfaces a distasteful, gummy look. The odd thing is that although his canvases bear a thick visual soup of paint, his colors never come together. In fact, he seems to choose them — hot yellows and reds, black, white, brown — for their optical immiscibility. As their titles indicate, Sicilia's paintings have flowers as their point of departure.

The works of both these artists illustrate well, if not intentionally, the dilemma faced by painters who renounce subject matter. The difficulty is to find in the activity and materials of painting some justification — or just some momentum — for turning out more canvases, for sustaining the pretense of "having something to say." I would like these artists' works more if I believed the painters themselves thought their art should not attempt to "say" anything. But that is not the impression I get from what I see.