

WORLD OF ART

Putting movie melodrama on canvas

By ROGER GREEN

Adrian Deckbar's large painting "Scene 3: The Letter" portrays a young woman reclining on a bed — a dreamy, distracted expression clouding her face, a half-crumpled letter clutched in her hand. The recently completed painting was created for a New York exhibition (opening next month) showcasing works by the New Orleans artists associated with the Arthur Roger Gallery.

Like all of the artists participating in the New York show, Deckbar has taken pains to contribute outstanding work to it. "Scene 3: The Letter," which is characterized by tight, polished execution and slightly startling realism, is perhaps her most technically accomplished painting to date. It is also a summation of her achievements and aims, which — among New Orleans painters at least — are unusual, even unique.

Deckbar likes to portray what she calls "highly charged moments with a sense of mystery," by which she means situations that are permeated with emotion but are somewhat ambiguous. The contents of the letter in "Scene 3" are a mystery to the viewer, who may only conjecture about the saddening news — possibly a romantic rejection? — communicated on the crumpled paper.

Yet such conjecture is exactly the response that the artist says she wants from the viewer, as a means both of engaging his attention and — more important — of triggering empathy, thereby underscoring the universality of human emotion.

"I don't like things that are blatantly obvious," says Deckbar, whose paintings reveal the truth of Mies van der Rohe's much-quoted dictum, "Less is more."

THE CHARGED MOMENT portrayed in "Scene 3: The Letter" is intentionally melodramatic, strongly recalling a scene from a Hollywood film. "A good movie will entrance and intrigue me for days," says the artist about the cinematic inspiration for the heightened, sometimes tawdry theatricality of her art. However, still photography has been even more important for Deckbar, providing her with figural imagery and accounting for the impression of immediacy that almost invariably characterizes her paintings.

Deckbar always photographs her models, sometimes singly, as with "Scene 3: The Letter," at other times — according to predetermined scenarios — in costumed groups. To create her paintings, she faithfully copies the color photographs, after first projecting them — as 35mm slides — onto canvases treated with an acrylic ground tone, and then tracing the projected outlines of the figures, using pastel.

Working in this manner, she often portrays figures from odd, oblique angles, or with parts of their bodies cut off by the edges of the composition, as in photographs. In this way, she continues a tradition initiated in the late 19th century by Edgar Degas, who was also influenced by photography and who liked, he said, to frame compositions "as if you looked through a keyhole."



Staff photo by Ellis Lucia

Adrian Deckbar, posing in front of her painting "Scene 3: The Letter," likes to portray "highly charged moments with a sense of mystery." She created the technically accomplished work for an upcoming New York exhibition showcasing New Orleans artists.

Finally "Scene 3: The Letter" is distinguished by its highly refined execution, in particular Deckbar's painstaking depiction of creases in the figure's black garment, a slip, and in the shiny blue sheet covering the bed on which she reclines. The rumpled fabric is patterned with convincing highlights and shadows, demonstrating the artist's technical virtuosity and also testifying to her habit of dramatically lighting her models, with high-voltage tungsten lamps.

DECKBAR, A NEW ORLEANS native, studied at three different universities, earning three different degrees, while perfecting her polished, narrative painting style. She began as an undergraduate at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette, where she was powerfully influenced by Elemore Morgan Jr., her drawing instructor. However, the art department at USL was then highly experimental in outlook and therefore difficult for a student who was only interested in becoming a realist. "All I wanted was to learn how to draw and paint," she says.

Much more comfortable was the University of California at Davis, where she earned a graduate degree in painting in 1979. There, studying with photo-realists Robert Bechtle and Richard

McLean, she felt no need to justify her desire to paint realistically, and could concentrate instead on mastering technical tricks. Among these was shading with colors rather than black, and developing the entire surface of a canvas in a uniformly finished manner. In addition, and because the school required a strong, personal direction of its graduate students, she developed her current practice of creating narrative paintings in series.

Returning to New Orleans, she earned a second graduate degree in painting from Tulane University. There, her most influential teacher was Pat Trivigno, she says.

DECKBAR'S FIRST SERIES of paintings, a collection of seven canvases called "Kidnap," was completed in 1979. The paintings, each portraying a man and a woman brandishing guns and knives, together with a gagged female victim, graphically depict a kidnapping in progress. The subject was inspired, according to Deckbar, by Patricia Hearst's kidnapping and other acts of terrorism in California. The three painted figures, portrayed in active, angular postures, are viewed not only straight-on but also from above and below in the various paintings.

The photographs on which "Kidnap"

was based were carefully staged with models, among them the artist's husband at the time, painter Sam Still. Ordinarily a photo session for one of her series of narrative paintings will last up to three hours, during which Deckbar will shoot several rolls of film. Most of her models are friends, she says, but some are just "right-looking" people she discovers in the streets.

She also has produced series titled "B Movie" and "Girls," both dealing with people interacting in situations that can be interpreted in various ways. In addition to narrative series, Deckbar has created portraits and paintings that she says "compact" a complicated story into a single engaging image. "Scene 3: The Letter" is an example, as is "The Dinner," which portrays a standing woman — obviously the hostess at a dinner party — peering through a curtained window behind a table set for a meal.

Asked about her future plans, Deckbar says, "There are so many elements I'm still learning about and discovering that it's difficult to talk about tomorrow or next week." However, she intends to continue creating narrative paintings and to try to inspire empathy in her viewers. "I aim," she says, "to get better and better at making people discover things about themselves. Art is really close to therapy in this way."