

**New York Visions:**  
new paintings by  
**Mikhail Gubin**





Mikhail Gubin's studio, March 2005

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*Mikhail Gurbil*

Thursday, October 20 through Friday, December 2, 2005

Flossie Martin Gallery

Radford University Art Museum

If photographers become recognizable by their subject matter, we usually think about painters in terms of style. With this exhibition, the RU Art Museum captures a painter in the process of recasting his style. Rather than viewing a body of work that points to a unity of conception, we are present at the creation of a new sensibility. It is a sensibility that is shifting away from narrative toward greater abstraction, and at the same time is infused with the love of the émigré for his new country.

Mikhail Gubin was born in Kharkiv, Ukraine in 1953. Largely self-taught as a painter (he attended art classes at the Palace of Pioneers in Kharkiv), Gubin came to artistic maturity before the social reforms of perestroika, at a time when avant-garde art was relegated to surreptitious "apartment exhibitions" where painters dared show their work only to a few trusted fellow artists. Gubin's and others' calls for artistic freedom led to trouble with the authorities; he brought his family to New York in 1989 and became a U. S. citizen in 1995. He is vocal in his appreciation of the opportunities that America has given him, and his recent turn to painting the streetscapes of Manhattan is very much an homage to his adopted home.

Gubin brought with him from Ukraine a love of story-telling. His works from the 1990s range from witty social commentary to dark, brooding meditations on the human condition. *Venetian Feeding* depicts modern-day tourists (the shorts and blindingly white sneakers are dead giveaways) feeding a mermaid as they might a dolphin at Sea World. If they treat the mythical mermaid like an aquarium oddity, Gubin seems to query, how sensitive can they be to the true wonders of Venice, evoked by the Byzantine-Gothic architecture in the background?

In *A Boy Who Is Called Sebastian*, the Saint is depicted as a young boy – his martyr's arrows rubber-tipped – who is the target of older playmates' malice. The work can stand in for the many humorous, even ironic adaptations of existing narratives that Gubin's paintings from the 1990s share.

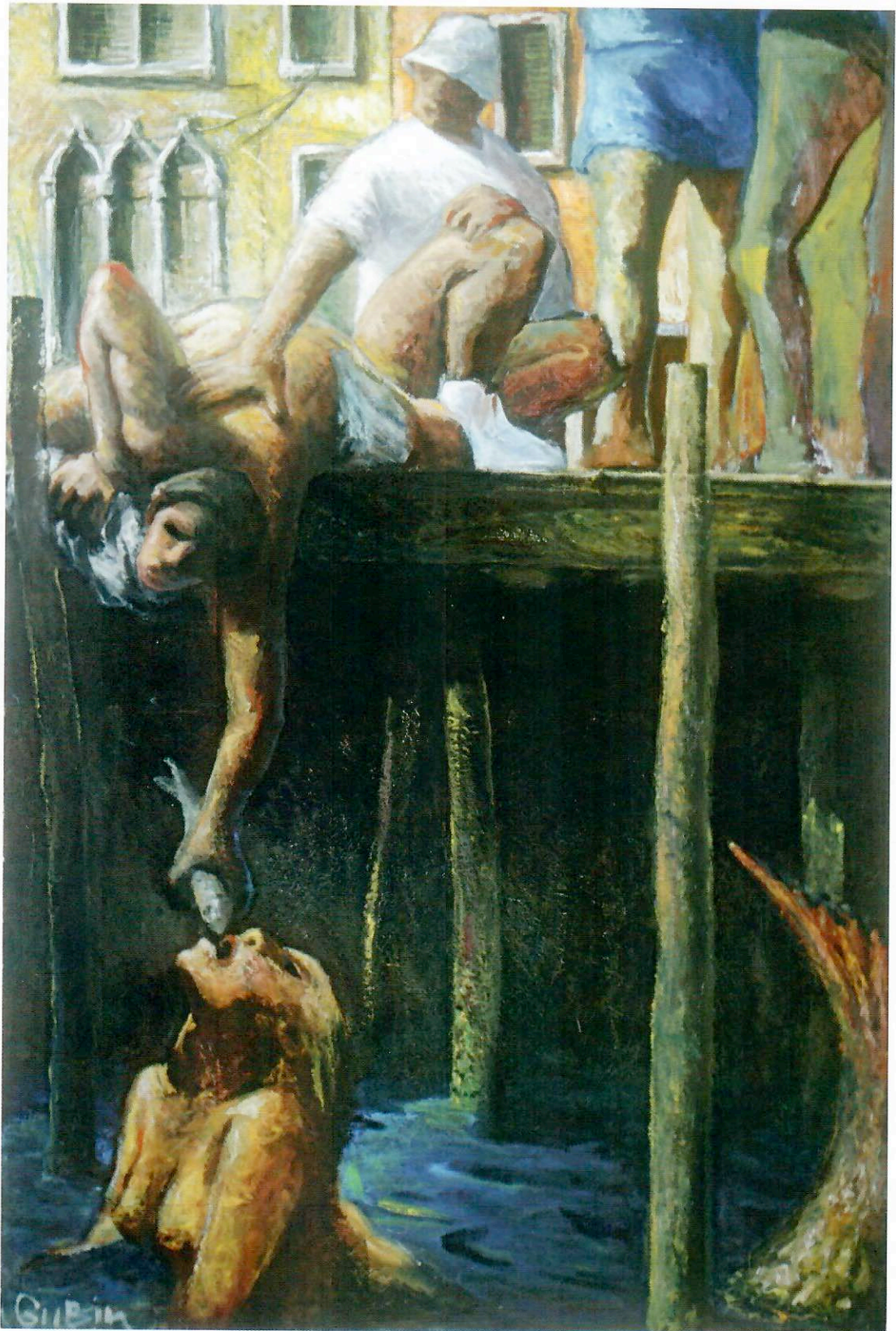
2001 was a turning point in Gubin's oeuvre, marked by a quick review of a number of artists whose works offered up something to his search for a style that emphasizes form more than narrative: He cast his net widely, looking to Sanford Roth (*Early Morning in a Back Street of Naples*), Abstract Expressionist Arshile Gorki (*4<sup>th</sup> of July*), even the Roman Baroque painter Caravaggio (*After Caravaggio*).

Gubin is drawn to special qualities of light. *Early Morning* is a study in the flattening of forms induced by the uniform illumination of grey morning light, a flattening that lends weight to a sense of isolation in the figures. His palette lightens, and he becomes a colorist; note the way he picks up and even exaggerates the redness of the hands from Caravaggio's 1590 *Bacchus* in *After Caravaggio*.

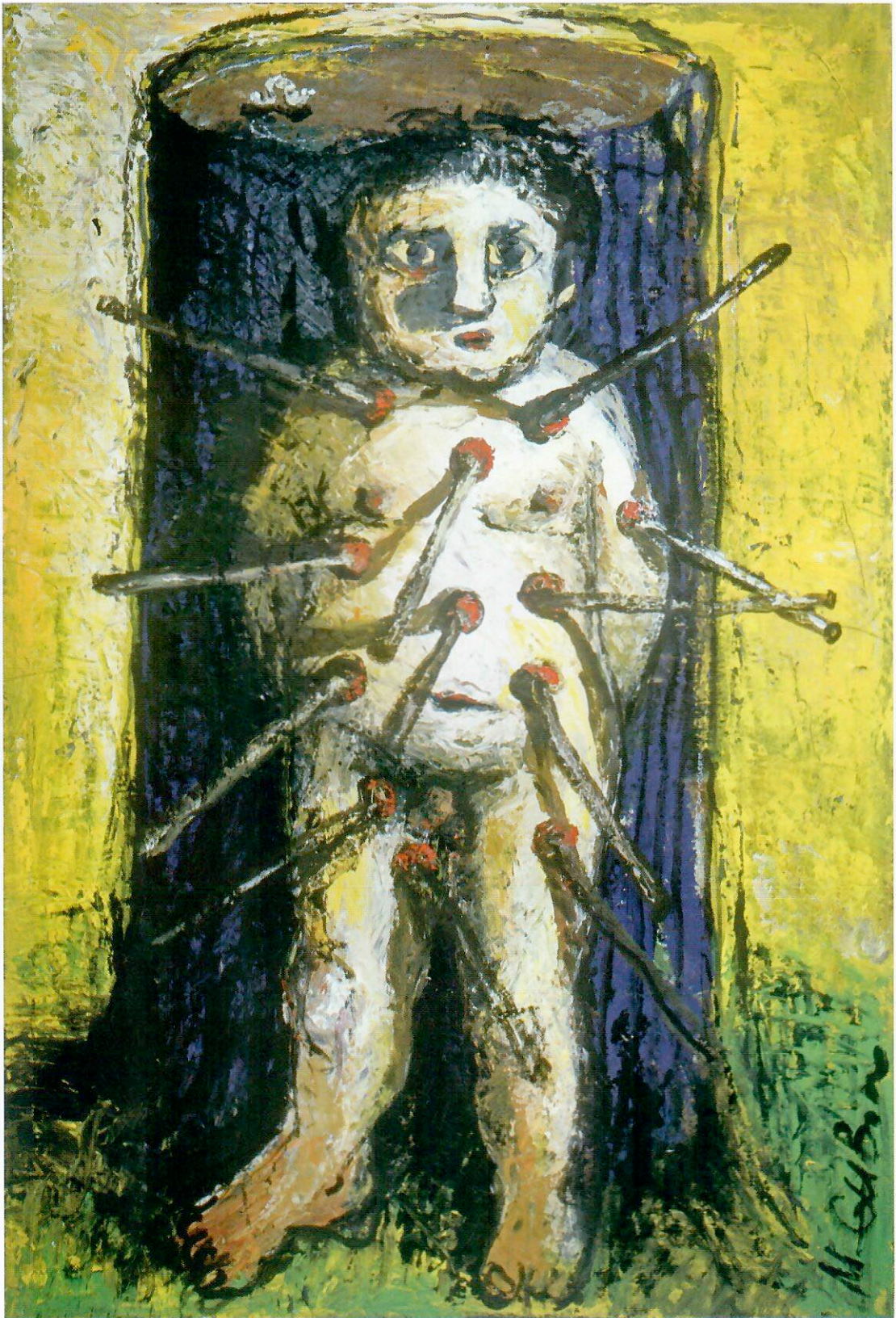
Interiors – whether spatial (*The Opened Door*) or psychological (*Early Morning* again) – give way in 2004 to an opening out to the city in response to his affection for his adopted home, Kew Gardens, in Queens. In a number of the works in the exhibition, we see Gubin reacting to the orthogonals of the city. The year before, in *Prague: Hradcany I* he was exploring a Cézanne-like interest in sustaining a tension between the three-dimensional cityscape and the two-dimensional "truth" of the canvas. Note how he carefully adjusts the gable-ended building to minimize its volume, lest perspectival effect overcome the flatness of the canvas. (Although Cézanne probably would have excised the graffiti we see on the wall at middle right!)

The final works on display, dating from 2004 and 2005, evidence Gubin moving to ever-greater abstraction, with large passages of heavily textured paint (impasto) that are barely restrained by the horizontals and verticals of the cityscape. Turning away from the overly-determined narratives of his earlier work, Gubin is today moving toward ever-looser handling of his materials. The outlines of cars and buildings in *Cloudy Day in New York* are decisively softened, in what I take to be an attempt to more directly evoke the excitement – literally the pulse – of the metropolis. In pushing his paint to match the experience rather than the optical reality of the city, Mikhail Gubin's search for the visual equivalence of urban immediacy will take him in uncharted directions.

– Preston Thayer  
Director, Radford University Art Museum



*Venetian Feeding* 1999 60" x 40"



*A Boy Who Is Called Sebastian* 2000 50" x 34"



*Early Morning in a Back Street of Naples (After Sanford Roth)* 2001 35" x 32"





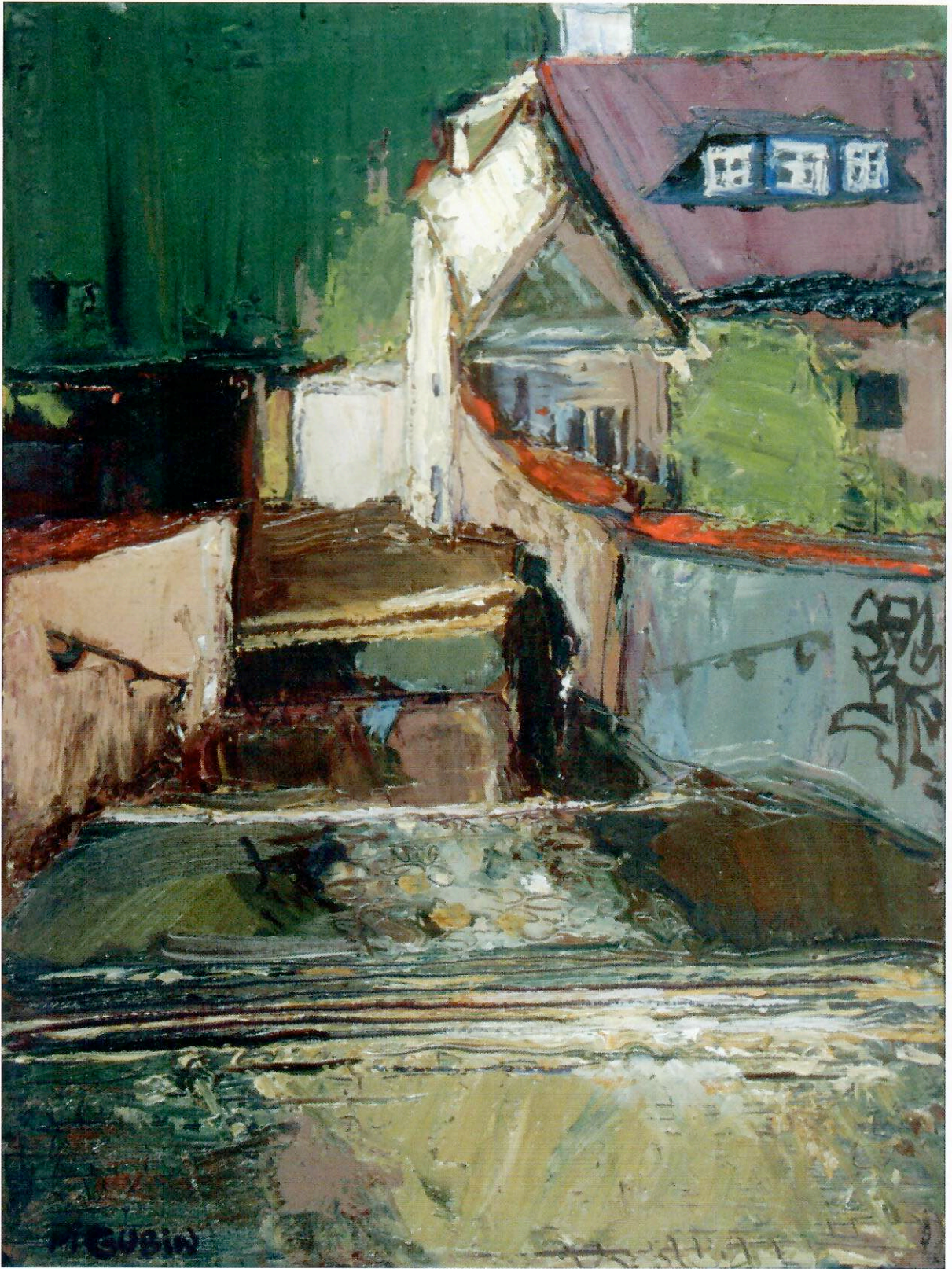
*4th of July* 2002 30" x 46"



*After Caravaggio* 2003 28" x 22"



*The Opened Door* 2003 18" x 24"



*Prague. Hradcany I* 2003 24" x 18"



*Lincoln Center I* 2004 22" x 28"



*Lincoln Center II* 2004 22" x 28"



*Columbus Avenue II* 2004 22" x 28"



*New York. Spring Street* 2005 28" x 22"





*New York. West Side* 2004 22" x 28"



*New York. Spring Street* 2005 28" x 22"




*New York. How are you doing?* 2005 16" x 11"

Designer: Tim Mullins

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Cover image: *Cloudy Day in New York* 2005 16" x 11"

Mikhail Gurbir

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