

Out of the Laundry and Off the Wall

Mario Caoile, from the Philippines, is a Portland artist who works at a dry cleaner's by day; other art around town includes photographs of prison bodybuilders, and Transylvanian icons.

BY ANNE SCHMITT

Mario Caoile at William Temple House

MARIO CAOILE'S paintings, at William Temple House through Feb. 3, constitute a commendable and daring, full-scale art show by a non-gallery; the quality of the work is likewise adventurous, a superlatively pleasant departure from the expected and the mediocre. Above all, this artist is bold. He is unafraid of experimenting with different styles and strange media.

Caoile, who left the Philippines in 1968, shortly before Marcos imposed martial law on the country, admits, "Maybe I have not found my style yet. It's not very important." What is important to the 36-year-old artist is to "make something that works." He says that what he is trying to do is spiritual, although "most people are scared of that word."

The situation of the pieces on two floors and along the stairwell at William Temple House makes for intimate viewing that feels like an encounter or a discovery. *Paper Dog* is the first painting you see upon entering, the one badly reproduced on the Xeroxed exhibition poster. It is framed in an upside-down window frame, and the graphic part of the picture consists of a newspaper collage arranged so that the figure (a dog) is composed of colored "Snoopy" cartoons and the ground of classified advertising. This is marked over with pastels.

Like many Caoile (pronounced "Kawill") images, *Paper Dog* is somewhere between primitivism, surrealism, postmodern comic strip, and pure play. Many of the paintings look extraplanetary: *Her*, or *Arrival of the Great Silver Ship*; or *Search High and Low*, which depicts a creature that is part planarian, part fossil and part animate spinal column. In this category also belongs

Tennis Thought — in which a glorified tennis racket emanates a weird aura — and others, but by no means all, of the work.

The strangeness of the images might come in part from Caoile's slightly estranged perception, as an observer of this society who grew up outside the United States. If so, in a piece like *Tennis Thought*, he has singled out a commonplace and made it strange, operating from an unearthly perspective that is also an un-American perspective; the tennis racket, a symbol of wealth and elitism, turns into a spooked icon. But the work is ambivalent: is it irony or simple humor? This indecision is one effect of there being so many kinds of paintings to look at.

Some are altogether abstract, among them *Haiku*, *White Cross* and *Bureau of Electricity*. In these, as in the other works, the artist often explores unusual, 3-D textures. *White Cross* has a layered, slightly ripped, well-worked, and almost damaged surface of black with other colors showing through. It provides an interesting contrast to the crucifix that hangs above it as a permanent part of the William Temple House collection.

A few pieces — the self-portrait and *Still Life with Pyramid* among them — are realistic. The portrait satisfies a curiosity about what the artist looks like, but the still life is amateurish and should have been left out of the show.

This roughness of execution and variety of styles may be caused by Caoile's not having painted enough. Although his goal is to paint every day, he has not been able to support himself by his art, and works instead at a dry cleaner's as a drapery presser. Nonetheless, he has produced a lot of work. Most of the pieces in the show are recent — *Hour of Reckoning*, *The Blue Guitar*, *The White Room*, and *Building for the Present* among them — and *It's Open* was begun two



Mario Caoile: "unafraid of experiment"

weeks before the show and is actually still unfinished.

Caoile knows how to play, and he does, for example in *For Piet's Sake*, an ode to Mondrian that looks quite like his geometrical abstractions except for the rough surface texture. The materials used for this piece were latex, Coverwall, masking tape, and acrylic on canvas. Caoile says that latex is cheap, and that he uses the other materials to keep the thin paint from running. He likes the challenge of using wall paint to make a painting.

He also likes to attach objects to his paintings: an oven component becomes an ominous death instrument in *Hour of Reckoning*, a coat hanger protruding from the frame completes the roof of a cathedral in *Sanctuary*, a gold and a black picture frame are glued to a blue background in *It's Open*, and the handle of a guitar pops out of the frame in *Blue Guitar*. This is only a partial inventory. There are little bits of wood (broken furniture?) everywhere, and *Womb Time* has a bristly, rust-colored, lichen-like surface built up from sawdust, oil, paint, and varnish. These additions work, by the way. They are creative, fresh and funny.

Douglas Kent Hall: "Shot in Prison"

IN A SERIES OF 17 photographs at Portland State University's White Gallery, a hallway/art space on the second floor of Smith Center, Douglas Kent Hall manages to stop traffic. The photographs are arresting, a little dangerous, hard to pass by without comment.

Hall lives in New Mexico, where he is a writer and filmmaker as well as a photographer, although he has taught at the University of Portland. In the Southwest, he has photographed ethnic groups in their environments, and has done a series on cowboys. The photographs at White Gallery (through Feb. 3) were shot when he accompanied Lisa Lyons and Arnold Schwarzenegger to their bodybuilding workshops in San Quentin and Folsom.

The series shows the physiques and faces of male prison inmates, mostly bodybuilders. Although it is done in a straightforward, documentary way, its subject is reminiscent of the prison angels that fill a novel by Jean Genet. Their archetypal physical beauty delivers a shock, standing as it does in contrast to the stark environment.

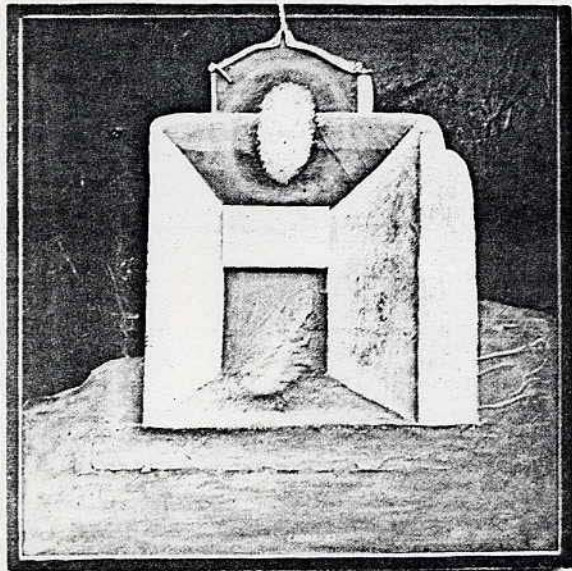
The interest of the photographs is sociological as well as aesthetic. One wonders whether prison, which is known for its emasculating, humiliating psychological effects, accounts for the popularity of bodybuilding in an attempt to regain dignity.

Hall shoots one of the photographs through a cyclone fence, reinforcing the viewer's distance and hinting at the mystery of life behind bars. He concentrates on individuals, who wear knit stocking caps and face the camera honestly. He also picks out groupings of men, their chests sticking out like shelves and their arms swelling. These group portraits are particularly dynamic, suggesting the realm of personal politics within the prison: who is the leader, and who are the subordinates? One sees the prisoners' pride, grace and power, thinks of their wasted strength, their threatening potential, their oddly unbalanced present. The subject is disturbing and foreign, challenging the environment of the show and its audience of passersby.

Transylvanian Icons at Folk Craft Gallery

THE RELIGIOUS nature and basic aesthetic of most icons render them foreign to a modern Westerner. These icons on glass from Transylvania are unusually accessible, although several things about them will be surprising for anyone familiar with the icon tradition: they have an author (icons are usually anonymous), are painted on glass rather than wooden panels, and use a cheerful, flexible, Western-looking iconography.

The artist, Anton Percussi, is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin.



Sanctuary, a painting by Mario Caoile