

BY ALEXANDRA BELLOS

# THE REAL



VIEW OF A 1995 INSTALLATION

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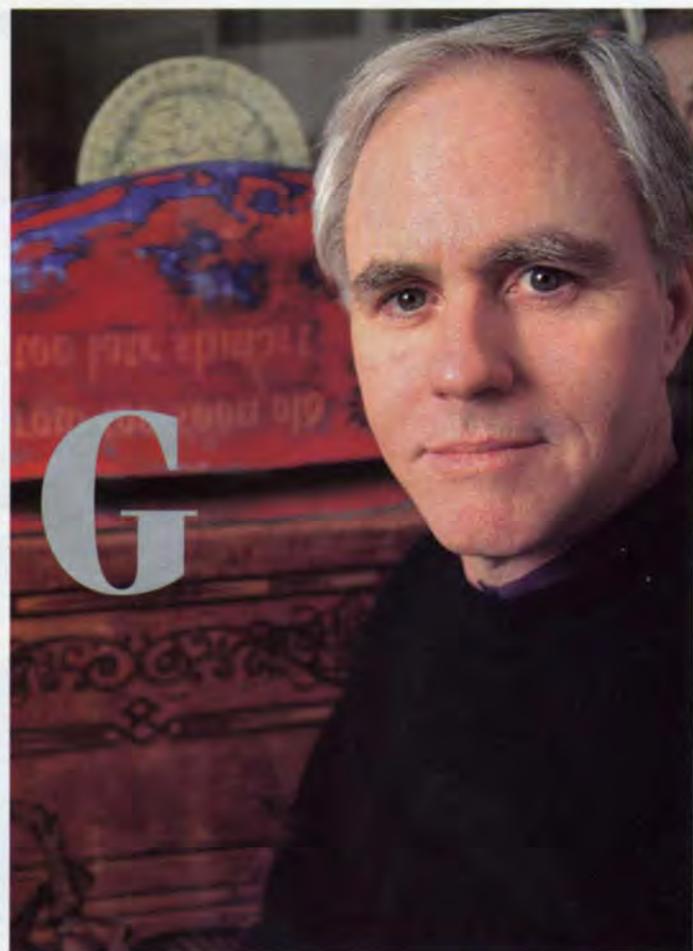
Artist Pat Schuchard examines, questions and challenges the way we see the world.

In the corner of Pat Schuchard's living room sits a beautiful baby-grand piano, softly illuminated by sunlight that spills through large windows. The light casts a golden glow over the instrument's dark surface. But look closer. Although Schuchard is one of St. Louis' most talented artists, Rachmaninoff and Beethoven aren't part of his repertoire.

He made the piano out of felt and wax. "From where we're standing, it has the presence of a real piano," he says. "But when you *really* look at it ..."

Schuchard's piano is part of a recent series of sculptures made of felt, wax and oil paint. Through these media, he's trying to comment on the fundamental nature of reality and the essence of things. In fact, since the late 1970s, most of his drawings, paintings and sculptures have.

"A friend of mine who's a taxidermist has two stuffed cocker spaniels in his studio," Schuchard says over coffee and homemade caramel rolls in his kitchen. "One of them is lying on the floor beside a heating vent, and in the winter, the heat blows its fur. It has a ball between its paws and a Ralston-Purina bowl filled with water off to the side." Schuchard smiles, as if he can see the dog in his mind. "Now, the whole thing looks very natural until you bend over to examine it. Then you see that the ball is nailed to the paws. You go into his studio expecting to see dead things that have been preserved. But the evidence that's been placed around this object adds up to a very interesting lie. In fact," he continues, warming to his subject, "the lie that's being told through the art of taxidermy is more interesting than the object



JENNIFER SILVERBERG

itself. In some ways, I think of it as connected to the Pygmalion myth — a myth about regeneration and reconstitution and, ultimately, for the artist, about representation."

Schuchard smiles again. "My friend says he can't do dogs anymore — clients won't pay for them once they're completed because he can't invest them with enough realism to fulfill the client's expectations. It's impossible for him to re-create or simulate a person's love for his pet, or even in any real way to embrace that relationship in his art. Yet all good artists try to embrace something *more* about the relationship of the object to the world around it."

Over the past few years, Schuchard has become well known for exploring that relationship. An associate professor of art at Washington University and head of the painting department, his work is attracting increasingly larger audiences. Recently, he's had exhibitions in San Antonio, New York City and Paris. The scale of his work ranges from the small (a series of decorated tape dispensers) to the heroic (a football field-sized mural of a horse race at the Oaklawn Park race track at Hot Springs National Park).

Although Schuchard is pleased to have his work so widely shown, he's deeply ambivalent about other aspects of being an artist.

"Pat is thoroughly honest and unpretentious — he doesn't try to sell himself," says Richard Kurtz, director of Wash. U.'s clinical-psychology training program and a friend of Schuchard. "He doesn't buy into the compulsive self-promotion that characterizes 90 percent of academia. His way of connecting with people bypasses the manipulative networking that so often passes for friendship in that world. He has no illusions about the gallery system, either. What drives him is his desire to express himself and to say something about form."

Sue Eisler, a well-known St. Louis artist, shares Kurtz's appraisal. "Pat



PAT SCHUCHARD, DETAIL OF "12 PRESIDENTS," 1995, MIXED MEDIA, EACH 12 INCHES IN DIAMETER

expresses the harsh reality of growing old vs. the infantile state of ignorance," he muses. "In a funny way, the phrase gnaws at you. It's like a hook or handle. It has enough truth to it, a plausibility that goes in and out of focus. I try to direct the viewer in a way that's a lot like how I look at the phrase and the tape dispenser as I think about it and work with it. It mimics how the mind works." He shakes his head. "But I don't know why I use the images that I do. And I'll tell you, I don't want to know. Because I don't want to make work that's self-indulgent. My work isn't art therapy."

Schuchard leaves the interpretation of his work to others. Don Bacigalupi, curator of contemporary art at the San Antonio Museum of Art, where "Wall of Sound" was shown in 1994, says that the album-cover paintings aren't ultimately about realistic representation. "Nor are they about the records they portray," he says. "What they are about, to a large extent, is Schuchard's *process* — the process of seeing and the process of painting, and the whole range of activity within that enterprise. Perhaps more importantly, they're about trying to wrest meaning from a world flush with images and things, both mass-produced and made by hand."

The process started early. Born in 1951, Schuchard grew up in Webster Groves. "I knew from the time I was 8 or 10 that I wanted to be an artist," he says. "I wasn't a precocious art kid or anything — I just knew that I wanted to be an artist someday. I used to draw Indians and cowboys. Later, when I was older, I started making portraits." He describes himself as a miserable student and a troublemaker who almost got kicked out of high school. "I had bad grades and a bad attitude," he admits. "But when I got into art school in college, I felt that's when my life really began." He got his undergraduate degree in art at Washington University and an M.F.A. from the University of South Florida, then participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art's independent-study program in New York City. Just as he and his wife, Terri, were planning on moving back to St. Louis, he was offered a teaching job at the University of Delaware. "We stayed for two years, and we could have stayed longer — I could have found a tenure-track job. But I wanted to come back to St. Louis, and that's what we did in 1977. I felt there were things I needed to do. At the time, of course, I didn't know what those things were exactly."

One of Schuchard's friends from those days says that he thinks Schuchard was fed up with the New York art scene. "Pat and I met at the University of South Florida when he was a grad student and I had my first teaching job," says Ken Little, a nationally prominent artist who now lives and works in San Antonio. "We were both very young and into a sort of elitist school of abstraction — you know, the kind of work that was getting a lot of attention in New York at that time." Eventually, Schuchard and Little both returned to using realistic images in their work. "We felt strongly that we wanted what we were doing to be accessible, available to more people than that New York crowd that we used to think about. In the end, I think Pat made a very conscious decision to make a life in St. Louis because he's so self-directed. Rather than looking to an institution or a gallery or any outside system to center himself or bring him into artistic equilibrium, he found inspiration through penetrating observation and hard work."

Schuchard is the first to admit that he has very little interest in the trappings of the art world. "I don't have a lot of patience with all that 'cult of the artist' stuff," he says. "Not that I'm not ambitious — when it comes to my work, I'm extremely energetic and determined. I can work tirelessly if I'm doing something that's important to me. But what I admire most in someone is his or her ability to proceed with their chosen life in an honest and earnest way. The art world can be filled with pretense, and it drives me crazy."

Schuchard's studio is a few steps away from the kitchen, through some French doors at the far end of the house. The studio is filled with objects —

understands that in the long run you don't make art for a show," she says. "You don't make art for the outside. You make it because you have to."

Schuchard's passion for his work shows when he talks about it. Listen to him discuss "Wall of Sound," a grid of dozens of painted felt-and-wax album covers from the 1960s and '70s that was part of *Objects of Memory and Desire*, his 1992 exhibition at the St. Louis Art Museum. "I started remaking record albums in 1989," he recalls. "Some of the covers were very carefully made and seemed real; others ranged from either workmanlike representations or crude facsimiles. Each one had a real record inside. Most of them had wear marks that gave evidence of being used, touched."

The album covers were accompanied by "Emotion Heads," an arrangement of life-size, three-dimensional wax heads. "While the heads aren't given a specific voice, it's clear that they aren't mute," he wrote in an artist's statement for the exhibit. "The suggestion of a gasp, a song, a cry of passion or pleasure, asks or even compels a sustained look, an encounter with memory or personal experience."

Although Schuchard often wonders why certain objects keep reappearing in his work, he knows that the process of selection is largely unconscious. "I think to myself, 'What are you making this stuff for? Why album covers and male heads?' Obviously, these objects have some deep meaning for me, but I don't know what it is."

A recurrent object in Schuchard's recent work is a Scotch-tape dispenser bearing a mock-German platitude, "We grow too soon old und too late smart," lettered in a sort of Gothic/Old English type. "The saying



A RECURRENT OBJECT IN SCHUCHARD'S RECENT WORK IS A SCOTCH-TAPE DISPENSER BEARING A MOCK-GERMAN PLATITUDE, "WE GROW TOO SOON OLD UND TOO LATE SHMART," LETTERED IN A SORT OF GOTHIC/OLD ENGLISH TYPE. CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A PAINTING/SCULPTURE, ONE OF SCHUCHARD'S "EMOTION HEADS" AND A PAINTED FELT-AND-WAX ALBUM COVER FROM HIS "WALL OF SOUND" SERIES.



tape dispensers, wax heads, a rural mailbox, a life-size set of priestly vestments made of wax and felt.

Artist Michael Byron, who's known Schuchard since art school, describes him as "both gentle and tenacious." Joseph Wesner agrees. "As a person and an artist, Pat's about as grounded as they come," says Wesner, director of the sculpture program at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit and a nationally known artist himself. "He stands in those old-fashioned footprints of hard work, and he demands authenticity both in himself and in his profession. He's demandinglly insistent in his search to understand things. His work doesn't stumble or get caught up in the trickery of theory. It's damned honest.

"I'm sure that at times, Pat's been a real SOB and not much of a party guy," Wesner continues. "He just doesn't like to put up with all the crap that most people expect you to look past. He's a 'the emperor's got no clothes' type of guy. But if he's ruthless with himself, his work is very generous as a result. Pat has critical responses to things, but they aren't based on cynicism, only on the offense he feels to the hope he holds closest to his heart."

Schuchard laughs when he hears that one of his closest friends has characterized him as an SOB. "When I look back on the things that Terri and I have done, like raising our son and daughter and trying to give them a good life while attempting to earn a living as an artist ..." He shakes his head. "It wasn't easy. You have to be pretty damned focused. When I did my first large-scale work, the murals downtown" — faux architectural murals painted on two buildings at the corner of Seventh and Locust — "I didn't know a thing about how to design or paint on a huge scale. I had to learn, and I had to learn fast. My responsibilities to my family always came

first, so I'm not in the habit of letting anything stand in my way."

He gives his wife credit for his success. "I've been extremely lucky to have a wife like Terri, who's worked so hard and who's accepted, without ever flinching, the problems of being married to an artist," he says. Married 21 years, "we have the kind of partnership that's very rare. My son and daughter both want to be artists, and even that doesn't shake her."

Schuchard shows a visitor slides of a recent project, a 5,000-square-foot sculpture done on 200 large, cast-concrete panels. Titled "Building Skin," it forms a mural across the front of a new student center at the University of Texas-San Antonio. Each panel features one of 12 repeating images that he considers central to the building's purpose: images of a large hearth, a hand with a lighted match, a figure walking up the stairs. "I wanted the work to function as a metaphor for life, experience, human aspiration and the individual's development in concert with the community," he says. "These are big issues, but I tried to leave room for humor and irony to undercut the preaching, authoritative voice present in so much public art." Evidently, he succeeded — the sculpture is known around San Antonio as "the people walls."

As he talks, he picks up the tape dispenser decorated with the "we grow too soon old" adage. "Every time I read that phrase, part of me still thinks, 'Boy, I better get myself together or I'm going to be a goner,'" he admits. "Then I step back and realize that I'm taking it way too seriously, that it's just an adage written by some sentimental German. Yet this process of going back and forth between believing and not believing is how we question our involvement in the world and in the real details of our lives." He smiles and gives the tape dispenser a gentle nudge. "And art, I think, is what allows us to get to the center of this inquiry."