



Far off the Freedom Trail, artist Richard Sheehan pulled up in his station wagon to paint *Twin Billboards* (top). Then,

in the same down-to-earth vein, he captures an every-day nineteenth-century *Gray House* (above) and

the bleak surroundings of the *Forest Hills Overpass* (right).



# CITYSCAPES

Local artists show us a Boston that has little in common with the picture-postcard version. But in their sculptures of trash and their paintings of traffic islands, they pay homage to the realities of urban life.

By Jane Holtz Kay

The quaint old Boston of bricks and Beacon Hill, of swan boats craning their necks in elegant wooden arches and monuments pointing skyward with divine hauteur, is not the Boston that attracts today's major artists of the cityscape. More painters, sculptors, and photographers than ever have taken to recreating the streets they inhabit, but Trinity Church is not on their canvas.

"It's not a nice city that I'm painting," says Flora Natapoff, scanning her collage of life under the elevated trolley tracks at North Station. The painting looks as worked over by time as the place it depicts. Richard Sheehan, whose paintings survey such architectural underachievers as the Dorchester gas storage tanks and the space beneath an overpass, says, "I was bored by Quincy Market." As for Christopher James, the closest his work comes to Boston the Beautiful is a rendering of the flight of steps at the Boylston Street subway stop.

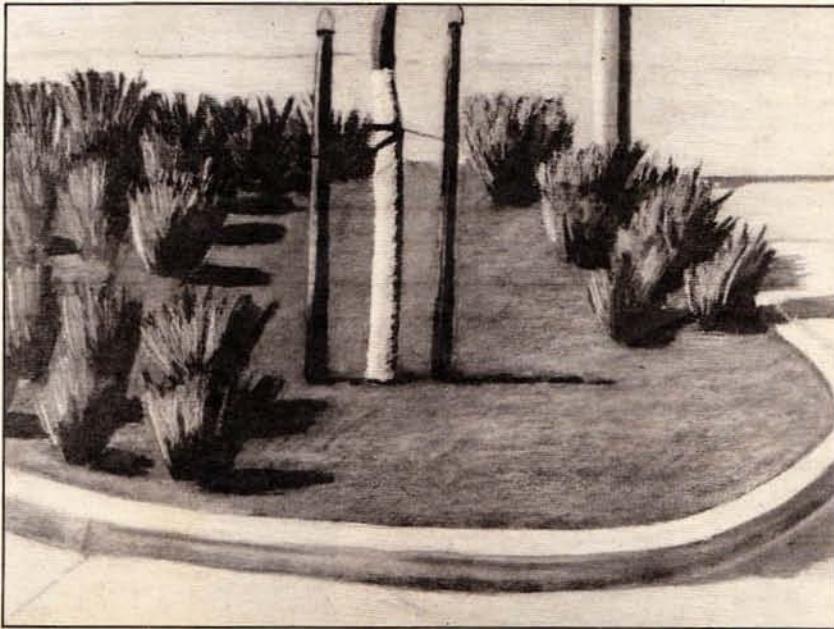
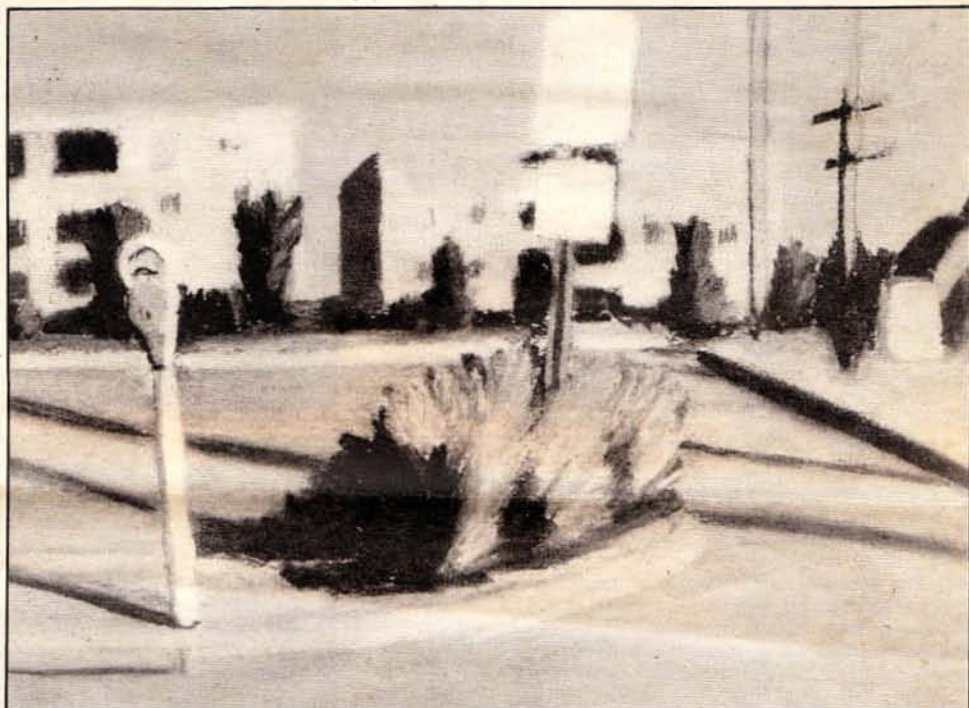
Karen Moss has painted trash, and Mags Harries has embossed and sculpted it. Whether the artists are young, like Susan Jane Belton, or veterans, like Reed Kay, their most personal visions are not conventional eye-pleasers: Belton depicts isolated traffic islands with woebegone yews, and Kay's canvases register the Citgo sign in Kenmore Square or the high-rise buildings he disdains.

This revival of artistic interest in the cityscape has nothing in common with the elegant Impressionism that Maurice Prendergast practiced here in the nineteenth century. Nor do these urban visionaries offer picturesque views of the seamy side of the city in the Ashcan style of two generations ago. What Boston's scenarists share is a drift back to a recognizable urban subject matter and to an identification with city life; their vision is finding a ready audience.

Reed Kay, who has methodically produced oil paintings of the Hub since the 1950s, remembers when reactions were otherwise: "What are you doing painting all those mementoes?" he was asked in the days when abstraction reigned. "The gallery was not very happy," Kay recalls. "They [the paintings] pretty much went over like a lead balloon."

Unlike most of the current painters of Boston, Kay came to his urban passion by birth: He grew up in the West End, since eradicated, then moved to Roxbury. A sense of loss heightens his recollections of the city. "You went back and looked and it was rubble," he says. But he has a deep appreciation for what remains: The bricks, the water, the air, a personality. "I got hooked," he says. "The forms were there. The color was there. Boston has a marvelous

JANE HOLTZ KAY IS THE AUTHOR OF *LOST BOSTON* AND HAS BEEN ART AND ARCHITECTURE CRITIC FOR THE *CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR* AND ART CORRESPONDENT FOR *ART NEWS*.



Susan Jane Belton records the *Parking Lot* in Medford from which she takes the train to her South End studio and *North-eastern Shrubbery*, a college's ragged plantings.

## CITYSCAPES

Continued from page 16

ate the split between city and suburb. She sees still another break on the T — the break between the downtown and the down-at-heels folk. "You go to work and the whole population changes at Washington Street," she says. The people in suits empty out at State Street. Then the winos, the people without portfolio, follow her route, and the route of so many artists here, to the worn and neglected fringes of the city.

Flora Natapoff, probably the most accomplished painter of the Boston scene, casts an analytical eye on another MBTA stop. But it is more the formal structure and mottled ambience of the underworld near Boston Garden that comes forth in the canvases at her studio and in her recent exhibition at the Marcus Krakow Gallery.

"I'm not an ideologue," says Natapoff. "I'm interested in both forms and subjects." However abstract her views — either in the early Kline-like slashing structures or in the

current more cluttered work — there is a sense of place that is almost tactile. "It's not a polemical position," the artist says. "It has to be a natural evolution. I react to the urbanness. I'm looking for something in the imagery. It is seedy," Natapoff admits, "but there is something about the light." Her paintings record not only that light but a locale. Hers is an approach that goes beyond the Boston scene to reflect the gestures of an independent style.

Christopher James offers the same kind of personalized statements through a more impersonal medium: the photograph. In his work, at the Marcus Krakow through January 6, he creates almost spectral effects by toning and painting his views of an almost empty landscape; his are surreally tenantless places. Shadowed by grime and disuse, a North End wall, seen through the weeds, seems ageless; other Boston scenes have an Old World antiquity.

Like most artists, James almost unconsciously edits the landscape where he lives, finding in a seemingly casual way

an image he wants to make his own. "I take photographs when the muse moves me," he says, "when I see something that moves me visually. I don't shoot recklessly." In the studio he tones the broad surfaces of the work with mellow shades; he heightens their three-dimensional, structural elements with pencil-thin enamel lines that almost leap out from the work.

Although such scenes as Harvard's now vacant and derelict gymnasium, Carey Cage, look vast and desolate, James responds to them. "There was an aura to it," he says. "It was isolated, a very silent place. There was no action, no people." That urban indefinable — call it ambience — is an outline on which he creates subtle artistic and psychological effects.

Alone in this group, James McGowan creates clear representations of familiar urban settings. Isolating such urban landmarks as State Street from their compacted setting presents obstacles of another sort. When he says "It's tough

painting in Boston," he is referring to the guerrilla tactics needed to position his van or to set up his easel on some well-trod street.

The city scene is a scene in flux; morning to evening the shadows race across the landscape, indifferent to the artist as he tries to fix an instant in time. To capture the two o'clock light, McGowan must pass a day sketching the background. Then, "between two and three, I would dive into the painting because the light would be perfect," he says.

McGowan, a house painter who came late to his art and now finds his paintings placed in city businesses by Elinor Woron Associates, responds happily to the changes in the city. "There's a lot of building, new and old, a lot of change. It gets you hopped up to go in and paint," McGowan says. And yet, it is the Boston of his youth that finds its way onto his canvas: the North End, where he grew up, and corners of Charlestown and the South End, where he played. The places, now dim in his memory, reflect his childhood excursions

through Boston.

Richard Sheehan, too, is a native in pursuit of the arresting corners of his city. It is the almost empty swatches of city — the Dorchester gas tanks against a swath of blue sky, Dorchester Lower Mills, Forest Hills, or an overpass — that cause him to stop his station wagon and start to paint.

Not for this artist the stereotypes of the city on a hill. He looks tentatively at his own painting of Quincy Market and shakes his head. "I think it's too hard to do," he says. "It's the way we know it as image. For me to look at Quincy Market . . . it's just not there. I think you really have to be surprised by it. If I start getting bored then people get bored. It's powerful subject matter, but its power is dispersed by its familiarity."

The same might be said of all the landmarks in the city for most Boston artists. A sense of place and of the past draws an increasing number of scenarists here; but their independence and talent make them shun the staples of sentiment and history to seek out their own private vision. ■