

## **Deco Bookshelf**

### **By Jim Sweeney**

If you're interested in old theaters, sooner or later you'll run across the paintings of Davis Cone. He's a photorealist who paints deco theaters as they are today, in loving detail and usually in the most flattering light possible.

His work is summarized in "Popcorn Palaces: The Art Deco Movie Theatre Paintings of Davis Cone" by Michael Kinerk and Dennis Wilhelm (\$29.95 hardcover, Abrams).

Kinerk is a founding member of the Miami Design Preservation League and co-author of "Rediscovering Art Deco U.S.A." Wilhelm is also a co-author of "Rediscovering Art Deco U.S.A.," and chief architect at Arquitectonica.

The book reproduces 80 of Cone's paintings in color. The authors, who clearly love Cone's paintings, summarize his work by saying "He likes to invoke in the viewer the feeling that mostly, what is being seen, is a shimmering image of a past time, now slowly fading."

While some of the theaters have been gloriously preserved, others show signs of wear and some are now gone (Cone estimates that 25 percent of the theaters he's painted are out of business or demolished). Some are urban, some are rural.

The Loew's Atlanta, the subject of one of the earliest paintings (1977) and the site of the premier of "Gone With the Wind," is now gone. It burned in 1978. The movie titles that Cone puts on the marquee often have a not-so-hidden message about the fate of deco theaters. This building has "Curse the Dead" and "Scream Bloody Murder."

Other movie titles that Cone has added to marquees include "Staying Alive," "Goodbye Cruel World," "Time Machine," "The Survivors," "Sudden Death," "Seems Like Old Times" and "Time Walker."

Another hidden text that sometimes pops up in Cone's paintings is

his signature, the authors note. In his 1980 painting of the Park Theatre in Memphis, you can just make out "Cone 1980" on a car parked out front, in the space on the body where a dealer name normally sits.

While the big theater chains make appearances in Cone's paintings, he often picks obscure theaters in small towns. His 1992 painting of the Hollywood Theatre in Litchfield, Minn., shows a 1935 structure by an unknown architect. It sits in a small-town business district. It has a plain stone facade with minimal ornamentation--a few vertical lines and circles--plus a tall marquee with its name.

Some of the small-town movie houses are more ornate. Cone painted the 1938 Wink Theatre in Dalton, Ga., in 1981. The authors note that the wedding-cake design over the marquee strongly resembles sets in Busby Berkeley's 1933 "Footlight Parade."

Over time, as is clear from the chronological order of the paintings, Cone's style has changed. In his earliest works he wasn't so much interested in the style of the building, but over time he has come to focus on 1930s deco buildings. His colors have become more intense.

His earlier paintings were more focused on decay, sadness and decline. The situation for deco theaters doesn't look so grim now, the authors say, and Cone's paintings reflect this in their mood.

The most recent painting in the book may indicate another shift in Cone's style. It's a close-up of the box office of the Berkeley Theater in Berkeley, Mich.

Two of the theaters he's painted have important roles in historic preservation. The Sam Eric in Philadelphia was the subject of a famous court case over preservation laws. And the York in Elmhurst, Ill., is now the headquarters of the Theatre Historical Society of America.

Interestingly, he's painted only three drive-ins.

Cone's style of photorealism, sometimes called hyperrealism, is not a precise reproduction of what Cone saw at the time. He works from the several hundred photos he takes at the scene. But like the atmospheric theaters of the deco era, he often enhances the scene's

atmosphere. He adds dramatic lighting to the street and clouds in the sky, reflects the building's neon in wet pavement, piles snow on the street so you can feel the cold.

Like any photorealist painter, Cone's work is startlingly realistic. Many of the paintings are indistinguishable from photos.

Like some Impressionist painters, he returned to some sites again and again to try out different lighting and moods. A 1987 watercolor of the Roxy in Northampton, Pa., shows the building on a rainy night, closely cropped to exclude the buildings around it. In 1991 he painted the theater on a rainy day, showing more of the surrounding buildings. He returned to the scene in 1993, showing the theater on a rainy night. Other than the time of day, this painting is identical to the 1991 painting.

Similarly, over a 10-year period he's done four versions of Miami Beach's 1936 Cameo Theatre by architect Robert Collins: one night scene, one late afternoon scene, and two day scenes, one sunny and one rainy.

Unlike many photorealist and hyperrealist painters, many of Cone's paintings are night scenes. Also unlike many painters working in these styles, he includes people in about half his paintings.

The people in Cone's paintings are mostly just loitering out front or passing by. Sometimes it's tempting to look for more meaning. In Cone's 1986 watercolor of the Colonia in Norwich, N.Y., a little boy turns his head to watch a family walking by. Is he seeing his future? Is the boy the father at a younger age?

The authors point out that Cone has several connections to deco. He now lives in Miami Beach. His grandfather, Royal Farnum, was president of the Rhode Island School of Design and was on the panel that represented the United States at the 1925 Paris Exposition.

One of the book's mistakes is the amount of space devoted to an interview with Ivan Karp, Cone's former dealer, who mostly talks about himself. There's a lot of art-world insider gossip that could have been cut.

The book notes that Cone's meticulous style means he produces

four to five paintings per year. Nonetheless, he makes a good living. Karp says that Cone can get \$130,000 to \$150,000 for a painting. Karp calls these "shocking prices" and estimates that fewer than 1 percent of artists can command these prices.

One interesting note in the Karp interview is that his former dealer says he thinks one reason Cone changed dealers is that he wanted more critical attention and notice from the art world. It doesn't seem like his career is being hurt by the lack of attention. And the fickle, fad-driven art press, and the art world in general, probably wouldn't be attracted to the realistic work Cone produces. The book says that he was rejected by the University of Georgia's graduate school of fine arts because his work was too realistic.

If you like Cone's paintings, his early career was covered very well in Linda Chase's 1988 book "Hollywood on Main Street: The Movie House Paintings of Davis Cone" (Overlook Press).

