Images hanging by a thread

VISUAL ART: Richard Cork
meets the 1999 John Moores Prizewinner, Michael Raedecker

Two large hooks hang down from the rafters or Michael Raedecker's white-walled London studio. They look disconcerting at first,' and give his room the air of an abattoir. But no carcasses dangle in this luminous space. Indead, Raedecker suspends his paintings from the hooks so that he can work on them with needle and thread. Embroidery, for this highly individual artist, is an integral part of the paintings he makes. And the results are so impressivc that Raedecker has just won the coveted John Moores Prize, a £25,000 award to be handed over on Thursday at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool.

As a judge of the 1999 prize, I am delighted with the painting Raedccker submitted. The largest he has yet produced. *Mirage* was the outcome of "a very intense period, when I worked long hours. every single day, for about four weeks. I saw it as a challenge to finish that painting for the John Moores deadline,"

Raedecker's strenuous commitment paid off. *Mirage* had to compete in open competition with well over 2,000 other paintings sent in for the Moores this year, but it stood out at once. Both I and my fellow judges - Germaine Greer, former Moores prizewinners Mark francis and Dan Hays and the new director of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor - were overwhelmed bv the avalanche of entries. Paintings, far from being dead, seems to enjoy boisterous health at the century' end. But our exhaustion was offset by the excitement of encountering submissions as outstanding as *Mirage.*

Racdecker invites us to roam across the panoramic width of this painting, as if we were travellers an epic journey. But the landscape unfolding in *Mirage* is a desolate locale. No one seems to inhabit this parched coutry, and there are few signs of vegetation. Plants are limited to the base of the two main trees, while their trunks and branches are as stripped as the bare, stricken woods in Paul Nash's paintings of First World War battlefields. Strange, glittering depos-

its, where Raedecker has applied sequins, counter the bleakness and even make this empty terrain seem beguiling. But the longer we gaze at *Mirage*, the less anything make sense.

Take the thin shadows cast alone the ground by both trees. They are contradicted by two more shadows, running up the trunks and destroying the illusion of perspective. Raedecker appears ro be suggesting that the entire landscape is as flat as a piece of painted stage scenery. He puzzles us even more on the right where the ground curves like a wave and, as thouch shaken by a seismic tremor, turns upside down. The violence of this upheaval is ominous, indicating that the world has suffered a catastrophic convulsion.

Raedecker, for his part, is buoyant and "really surprised" that he won the prize. He may put the money towards buying a house: "I'd like to find something much bigger than my flat in Vauxhali - a warehouse or an old empty pub which I could work on myself."

Although he grew up in his native Netherlands, training initiallv as a fashion designer, Raedeeker has lived in london for the past three years. He came here to take an MA in fine art at Goldsmiths College. "London was at the centre of all the media attention about art." he recalls, "and Goldsmiths made me more self-as-sured - I wasn' fully grown up before then."

His great-grandfather, John Raedecker, was the sculptor responsible for the prominent National Monument in the centre of Amsterdam. It was a prestige commission at the time, and Michael's work, in turn, is beginning to recieve recognition in the Netherlands. He has already won a Royal Painting Prize in Amsterdam, and Queen Beatrix has bought two of his paintings. Other Dutch collectors have acquired his work as well, but none matches the enthusiasm of Charles Saatchi, who now owns "at least 13 of my paimings".

Raedecker is a restless, energetic 36-year-old, tall, slim, and constantly making dramatic hand gestures to back up his remarks,

he never once sat down during the afternoon I spent in his studio near Tower Bridge. Open and confident, he has no time for Saatchi's insistence on calling him a Neurotic Realist. What, then, is the springboard for images as bewitching as *Mirage*? "I like 17th-century Dutch landscapes, the ones with moun tains," explains with an ironic smile. "But my own work starts like a dream. I'm fascinated by the fact that landscapes were there long before we came alone. Mirage is about seeing something that's an optical illusion. It's all fake, and I make my art ambiguous so that viewers can complete the paintings in their own minds. But people often tell me that my images derive from Australia or locations they've seen in films."

The thread plays a paradoxical role in his work. It emphasises the anificiality of a painling and, at the same time. "makes certain details stand out. To me, using thread seems such a natural thing to do. After all, there's a very old tradition of artists designing tapestries." But Raedecker is also aware of the risks involved io giving thread such prominence. While hovering dangerously near the borders of craft and folk art. he knows precisely where to stop and how to play off the thickness of embroidery against the thinness of his acrylic paint. Raedecker also stops short of introducing figures into any of his landscapes or interiors. "If I put one of my sad old men into a painting of a room, it would leave the viewer out." he explains, "When a room is empty, the viewer can step into it. But when someone's alreadv there, the painting becomes too close to narrative."

Raedecker wants his work to retain a vital sense of mystery, and he seems completely absorbed by the tantalising images conjured in his work. "I cherish being in my own private space," he admits. I really like going to the studio every day, and feeling that I can do whatever I want."

> *Raedecker's* Mirage *is included in the John Moores Exhibition 21, at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (0151-207 0001) from Sept 24 to Jan 9*

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