

THE GEORGETOWN CURRENT

Fraser Gallery delivers dynamic exhibit

David FeBland's "Splitting Atoms" exhibit at the Fraser Gallery comes at you like a gritty, rough-and-tumble movie — there's so much movement in it.

In "Westside Romance," a bag man barges through an alleyway, finding a cramped passage between a well-dressed, long-legged woman on a cellular telephone and a briefcase-toting businessman. In "Above and Below," an elevated train shakes the tracks as it hurtles toward us like a runaway fun ride, while on the packed sand of the yard far below, gang members fist-fight with abandon.

In another work, "Three Figures with Fireball," FeBland shows an industrial no man's land under the George Washington Bridge where flaming reactors conjure up nightmare memories of Jimmy Cagney's final scene in "White Heat." If you haven't seen the movie, simply try to recall your last carefree glance out the car window during a typical drive along the New Jersey

On EXHIBIT BY Max Pizarro

Turnpike anywhere near the Newark Airport. It's precisely a carefree attitude in the face of a nightmare that distinguishes the painting, as three well-muscled men in jogging sweats do vigorous calisthenics exercises while flames light up the sky behind them.

A self-taught painter, FeBland was in the Fraser Gallery last Friday, hanging his paintings in preparation for that night's opening reception.

"The exhibition shows a view of the culture separate from the mainstream," said the artist, a longtime New Yorker who bicycles around Europe every summer with a sketch book in search of people in action. Of course, he finds plenty of action in Manhattan and the outlying airport-factory-swampland. Anything bounded by razor wire and rivers, overhung with brick and steel buildings and populated by humpbacked hustlers is fair game for FeBland. The teeming metropolis is where the action of "Splitting Atoms" is concentrated, and denizens of the underbelly and ivory tower alike meet out on the street.

In the motions of these people, FeBland looks to capture "specifically diverse roles."

"We are all in our own universes in New York," he said. "You can divide people into hundreds and hundreds of subgroups, and they're all doing their own thing and they're all fascinating."

The surreal quality in FeBland's paintings comes in part from his regular practice of observing his subjects without taking photographs or making sketches. In his

studio, he creates an image based on what he's seen outside, rather than a straightforward reproduction from, for example, a photograph.

"I never transcribe anything," he said. "An event triggers an idea. Sometimes there's a social issue bothering me, and a person or activity on the street provides me with a way to give the idea expression."

And yet, he owes something to the early 20th century Ash Can painters like George Bellows and John Sloan, and to American regionalists like Reginald Marsh and John Stuart Curry, each of whom had a realist's sense of craft.

For FeBland, an illustrator for 18 years before he turned to painting at 40, art is worthwhile only if an artist is dedicated to balance, composition and color. "For me," he said, "good painting is an end in itself."

He elaborated.

"If the concept can't be delivered persuasively, then it's lost. If the artist is trying to communicate an idea but lacks the craft of painting, then he's not really an artist. Perhaps he's a philosopher. Then, if the idea is bad, that person is just a bad philosopher."

The Fraser Gallery, located at 1054 31st St., is scheduled to run "Splitting Atoms" through Oct. 13. According to gallery owner Catriona Fraser, FeBland secured his own exhibition at Fraser after winning the runner-up prize in a gallery-sponsored contest last year.

"There were 300 artists and over 1,000 slides involved in the contest," said Fraser. "I think what distinguishes David is that he's a very skilled painter who also has great concepts in his paintings. It's important to have both, and it's so hard."