The Beauty of Men

Patrick Angus was a shy guy with a brilliant brush

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American social-realist painter Patrick Angus had a short, unhappy life. But, as if in a fairy tale, he died -- from AIDS in 1992, at 38 -- in a glow of contentment, a kind of apotheosis. The source of Angus' malaise was the fear that the artwork to which he had devoted his days would end up in a dumpster, unseen. Given the hype and hustle of the New York City art scene, this was far from paranoia: Not only was Angus temperamentally unsuited to self-promotion, but his subjects were homosexual desire and loneliness, raunch, drag, strip joints, bathhouses and the like. In the documentary *Resident Alien*, Robert Patrick drags a reluctant Angus to show his paintings to an East Village art dealer. The dealer does indeed recoil in horror, and Angus, humiliated, rolls up his canvases -- he's too poor to afford stretchers -- and retreats to his tiny rented room.

Yet, almost as he lay dying, Angus was discovered. In his last year, after no prior showings of his work, he enjoyed three one-man exhibitions and was invited into several group shows. On his deathbed in St. Vincent's Hospital, Angus held the color proofs for a book of his paintings. "This is the happiest day of my life," he whispered.

It would gratify Angus that his work recently appeared in the monumental "100 Years of Gay Liberation" exhibition at Berlin's prestigious Akademie der Kunste, a virtual World's Fair of gay art and history. David Hockney once said, "If you have to be in a group show, send a big picture." Hockney did just that at the Berlin show, and the curator chose a big canvas from Angus' output, his "Boys Do Fall in Love." The two paintings were hung side by side.

Despite being tapped "the Toulouse-Lautrec of gay Times Square," Angus remains largely uncelebrated by today's art establishment. But his genius for observation, his humanism, his compassion for his subject and the sheer power of his artistry are all undeniable -- seen but once, his pictures are unforgettable. They are a beautiful and haunting record of an extraordinary epoque, and will eventually find their rightful place in our cultural history. Angus will survive.

Douglas Blair Turnbaugh is the author of Strip Show: Paintings by Patrick Angus, *published by Editions Aubrey Walter (Gay Mens Press), London 1992.*

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