



## JOE NYIRI

### Recent Works on Paper from the "Wizard of Oz" Series

Joe Nyiri, now in his early seventies, is one of the most creative and energetic forces on San Diego's art scene. Over the years, he has produced an enormously rich, diverse, and inventive body of work, perhaps only eclipsed by his reputation as a brilliant art teacher who has nurtured the creativity of the city's youth for more than fifty years. Whether addressing issues as profound as the Holocaust, as Nyiri did in his last Visual Arts Program exhibition in 1998, or comparatively lighter fare such as the *Wizard of Oz* – the theme of his latest exhibition – Nyiri's art is always ambitious, conceptually thought-provoking, and technically inventive.

His *Wizard of Oz* series, in development for more than a decade and never before exhibited, consists of mixed-media works on paper inspired by characters, objects, and places from L. Frank Baum's immortal children's novel, and also the 1939 movie starring Judy Garland. Nyiri's fertile imagination, masterful drawing ability, and adventurous sense of color serve him particularly well here as he tackles reinterpreting an American classic in a way that he hopes is "new, fresh, and unique." Adding more diversity and complexity to Nyiri's oeuvre is the fact that he feels unduly constrained creatively if he works in only one medium. Consequently he uses "different media to express different ideas."

Channeling all of these forces into tangible works of art has resulted in an extraordinarily varied body of work conceptually, stylistically, and technically. The viewer is taken on a visual and emotional rollercoaster as he or she is buffeted by imagery ranging from whimsical to sinister, abstract to representational, and monochromatic to kaleidoscopically colorful. Robert Rauschenberg, Jean-Michel Basquiat, outsider art, neo-expressionism, Georg Baselitz, cartooning, Deloss McGraw, graffiti art, children's art, Picasso, popular culture, Karel Appel, Jean Dubuffet, W. Haase Wojtyla, and believe it or not, wildlife illustration, are only a few of the artists, movements, and associations, high and low, that come to mind while viewing Nyiri's art. Media used include ink, spray paint, acrylic, enamel, oil, graphite, charcoal, oil crayon, pastel, collage, and colored pencil. In a lesser artist, this kind of stylistic inconsistency might be seen as utter chaos, but because each work in this exhibition is so well resolved and Nyiri's creative energy is so intense, he pulls it off. His enthusiasm and lack of concern whether or not art historians can pigeon-hole him are contagious and intriguing!

As spontaneous as many of Nyiri's works appear to be, they are carefully conceived and executed. According to the artist, preparatory drawings were made for approximately 80 percent of them. References may or may not be familiar, he cautions, because Baum's book differs substantially from the movie. Admittedly Nyiri's art is visually seductive, but the characteristic that will appeal most strongly to serious art lovers is its underlying darkness. One clue to the artist's mindset: In the book and movie, Dorothy's dog, Toto, is an adorable mutt resembling a Cairn or Yorkshire terrier. However, Nyiri, wanting to impart more of an edge to his art, conceived of the dog as a sinister and wolf-like German shepherd. As Dorothy so aptly put it, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." — *M. Lugo*

*Note: The artist will be giving a free, informal talk about his work on Saturday, July 18, at 1 p.m. in the library gallery.*