

Author's style seems too much, then not enough

By Michael Zangari

With Joan Didion's current book of essays, *The White Album*, still garnering much attention, the first paperback printing of her classic collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* comes as a reflective lattice work to her later work.

Book review

The essays come from a time period encompassing the tired 60s, a time when "in one way or another, things, are (were) falling apart . . ." Didion, herself, seems to have been dangling over the precipice, saying about the title piece that she was "as sick as she had ever been. The pain kept me awake at night and so for twenty and twenty-one

hours a day I drank gin and hot water to blunt the pain, and took Dexedrine to blunt the gin and wrote the piece . . ."

Didion's personal journalism ("new" journalism having about as much in common with Tom Payne as Hunter Thompson) is scattered. It doesn't matter whether she is writing about John Wayne of San Francisco in 1967, or morality. It is all personal buckshot, the impressions scattered in paragraph after paragraph. Some hit, others miss, revealing the strengths and weaknesses of the essay form.

Didion's real strength lie in her moviola glimpses into character. She has an innate talent for the moment, the ability to capture an individual in an isolated moment, a feeling for the obscure. She cups these impressions in the palm of her hand, relating them back to her own subconscious fears and desires, and comes up with remarkably stark portraits.

Didion is a very reserved writer, however, and this leads to moments of sterility and a feeling that she just won't go far enough to finish a piece. Compared to the shamanistic scream rituals of Hunter Thomson's dives into the heart of darkness, she seems strangely distant, uncommitted. It is as if she tackles a story in order to confront some personal demons, then exorcises them. The writing that comes from this tends to reflect a hurried pushing away of the subject.

She waffles in her introductions, they read notoriously slowly. The bodies (where there are some pure gems, incredibly competent prose, quiet insights) can be pin-pricks, brittle in the distance she places between revelation and commitment. The endings of the pieces tend to stop cold, leaving you with indrawn breath, looking for the exhale that will finish the piece. Often that exhale never comes.

The book is divided into three sections, "Lifestyles in the Golden Land" (essays on John Wayne, Joan Baez, a murderess in California, Howard Hughes, Marriage in Las Vegas, Michael Laski and the title piece on Haight Ashbury), "Personals" (essays on self-respect, morality, the movies, on keeping a notebook, on going home . . .) and "Seven Places of the Mind" (essays with titles like "Notes From a Native Daughter" and the "Seacoast of Despair.")

Didion's paradox throughout the book is that she is always seemingly giving too much, but never enough. Her numb darkness is Novocain in the gums, the needle's sting no less sharp. Her slowness, sometimes intolerably dry; pulls at you, pulls you into the visionary tailspin she is in. If for no other reason, this clarity of voice makes her one of the best writer/journalists publishing.

Varied art forms are highlighted

A special exhibition and sale of Original Graphic Art will be presented today and tomorrow at Sheldon Art Gallery from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Marson Graphic of Baltimore, Md., specializes in exhibiting for sale a collection of original etchings, woodcuts, lithographs and serigraphs. Featured will be works by Chagall, Daumier, Fantin-Latour, Maillol, Rouault and Whistler. A selection of works by noted contemporary artists such as Baskin, Coughlin, O'Connor, Kaczmarek and Eggers also will be included in the collection.

Some of the scenes seen with Allen Jones include a visit to a London latex and vinyl tailor, where his wife is fitted with one of his preliminary costume designs for *A Clockwork Orange*. Jones is also seen in his studio painting, showing his pin-up postcard collection and explaining his recent graphics, drawings and sculptures.

Former Lincolnite Sheila Bailie, now of Elyria, Neb., will display her weavings at the Haymarket Art Gallery through Feb. 22. Bailie received her B.S. in home economics and interior design from UNL in 1975 and her M.S. in home economics and textiles and design from UNL in 1976. She co-authored *Graphics for Interior Space* (University Press 1979) with M. Skjelver.

Showing his pottery at the same time will be Mark Chamberlain of Clear Lake, Iowa. His work has been shown in many juried art shows and art fairs throughout the Midwest.

entertainment notes

The collection is affordably priced with prints beginning at \$5.

Sheldon Film Theater's "Films on the Arts" series continues its third week with three films scheduled for Friday and Saturday, Feb. 6 and 7, at 1:30 p.m.—*Jasper Jones: Decoy*, *David Hockney's Diaries* and *Scenes Seen With Allen Jones*.

Jasper Jones is filmed while he works on *Decoy* at Tatiana Grosman's Universal Limited Art Editions studios. Barbara Rose narrates the film, explaining the complexities of Johns' approach to lithography.

David Hockney looks over many of his photo albums with the viewer, commenting on people and places and showing how his snapshots are used as sketches for his paintings. He is seen working on a large portrait of London fashion designer Ossie Clark with his wife, Celia. He discusses his important early paintings and drawings, and they are shown.

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