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ART IN REVIEW

Ralph Fasanella: 'A More Perfect Union'



Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

"Catholic Protectors Line-Up" (1961), by Ralph Fasanella.

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Andrew Edlin Gallery

Were Ralph Fasanella (1914-97) a trained artist, his political beliefs might have resulted in predictable Social Realist paintings. Instead, this child of the working-class Bronx largely taught himself painting in his 30s, evolving an altogether sharper and more original manner, politically and pictorially. The 14 works in this *fantastic little survey* — Fasanella's first show in a Chelsea gallery, by the way — span his five-decade career. They summarize his development and testify to his ability to weave history, architecture and layered social criticism into remarkable tapestrylike compositions that teem with human activity both good and bad, as well as homey details and a spectrum of glowing colors.

Early paintings like "Wall Street" and "Iceman Crucified #1" have relatively simple compositions but confirm Fasanella's passionate viewpoint and, especially, his innate sense of symbolism. It depicts his father — an ice delivery man — on a cross in the lobby of an apartment building (note the mailboxes and terrazzo floor). The building's curtained windows and steep stairways rise behind him; ice tongs hang over his head like an instrument of torture.

Soon Fasanella is orchestrating his own kind of history painting. "McCarthy Era Garden Party" (1954) depicts a Senate committee hearing overlooking a high-toned social gathering encircled by protesters. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who had been executed the previous year, sit on a pile of books at the center, as if they were the evening's entertainment. In 1963 Fasanella memorialized their story and execution in "The Rosenberg's Gray Day," a more assured, elaborate composition, centered on an enormous A.

The show's centerpiece is "Meeting at the Commons — Lawrence 1912" (1977), which records the historic strike of textile workers in this Massachusetts mill town, complete with protest march, empty factories, Pinkerton guards and what we would now call the corporate offices — a yellow-and-green building that contrasts noticeably with the dark pink brick of everything else. And don't miss "Catholic Protectors Line-Up" (1961), which recalls Fasanella's reform-school days. Its style is classic folk art, but a discomfort with authority is unmistakable.