

PHOTO: HAROLD SHAPIRO

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

Dorie Baker

Last September you may have noticed a large steel beam jutting through the plate-glass window of the Creative Arts Workshop Gallery. It was pretty hard to miss if you walked down Audubon Street. Like most people, we found ourselves drawn by the catastrophic beam into the Gallery itself. At the very least, we wanted to offer our condolences to the CAW administration and ask if their insurance policy would cover the disaster. As we discovered, the twenty-something-foot spike was the 3-D *trompe l'oeil* ruse of an artist, not the mishap of inept construction workers. More to the point, it was the very cleverly rigged up hoax of the artist whose retrospective show occupied the CAW Gallery that month. That was how Sam Wiener, an artist who needed no introduction to most people, first came to our attention.

more whimsical stuff 'Evangeline Tabasco.' The name itself—two brands of Louisiana hot sauce—came spontaneously to Wiener, who grew up in Louisiana.

"In 1976, I had a chance to put on a one-man show in a SoHo gallery." That was before SoHo, still the haunt of emerging artists, had become SoHo, the Art Marketplace of the World, so the space was not exactly at a premium. "There was this extra room in the gallery where I was showing," he recalls, "and I couldn't find anyone who was willing or able to fill it on short notice." So Wiener took matters into his own hands, as it were, and under the pseudonym of Evangeline Tabasco, filled the "extra" room with hastily assembled satirical pieces which poked fun at just about anyone who deserved it at the time—political and artistic icons, and those of us who worship them, are Tabasco's favorite targets.

If space was in abundant supply in the SoHo of the 70s, paid gallery personnel was almost nonexistent. Wiener found himself the security guard, curator, and greeter at his own show. "I was sitting in the room with my own serious sculpture, all these prize-winning pieces, and people would come in, give a cursory glance and go right for Evangeline's show. I would hear them howling with laughter and really enjoying themselves while I sat alone with my 'real' work." Getting upstaged by his own alter-ego proved to be a milestone in his career. "I decided satire and whimsy would be a bigger part of my public face," he says with good humor. Shortly after her successful start as an artist, Ms. Tabasco made her debut into

impolite society as Mona Lisa at the Night of Living Sculpture event in SoHo. Sam Wiener has graciously shared the stage with her ever since.

The retrospective mixed-media exhibit at CAW was, according to the artists, quite representational of their five decades of solo and collaborative work. The "objets" on display ranged from a "No-Gucci Green" coffee table *cum* one-hole golf course (replete with ball and club) to a collage under glass of neatly assembled pre-rusted aluminum can tabs meant to mimic a museum case array of archaeological artifacts. The latter is part of the series entitled "Splendors of the Sohites," which takes aim at museums in general, the Metropolitan Museum's gift shop, in particular, and, not incidentally, the "civilization" of SoHo ("a

SAM WIENER AND HIS ALTER EGO:

A DOUBLE ORDER OF HOT SAUCE

culture based entirely on creative arts"). *Art Depot*, a catalog of some of Wiener's and Tabasco's finest work, manages to send up art consumerism; mass market exhibits, of which the Traveling King Tut Show of the 70's was the prototype; just about every modern artist (Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Serra, and even the grand spoofer himself, Andy Warhol, among them), and the very institution of the consumer catalog itself.

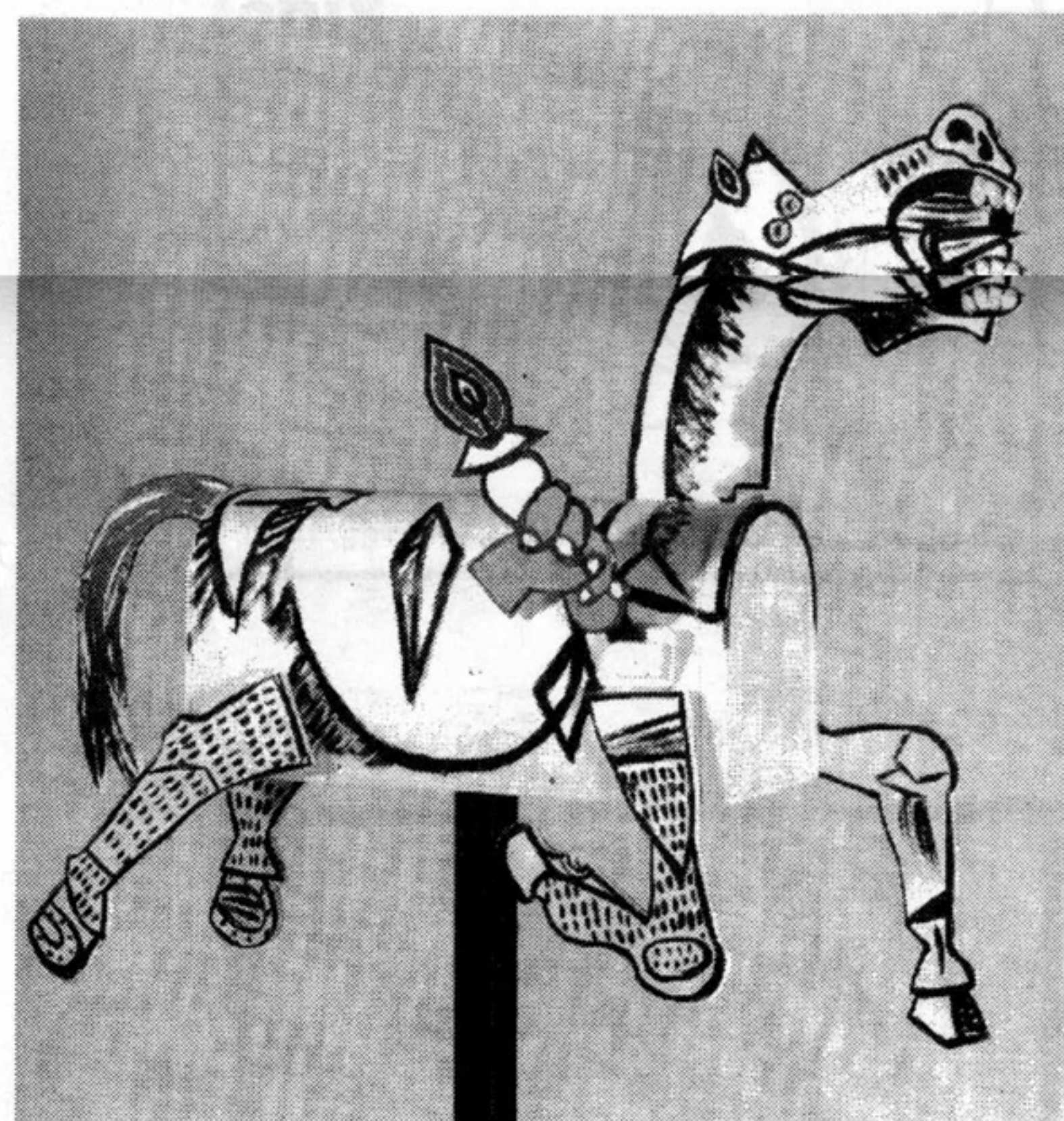
Surprisingly, for someone who is devilishly witty in his work, Sam Wiener's manner suggests courtly benevolence and stately grace (perhaps it is the subtle trace of a Southern accent in his speech). He insists quite convincingly that his satirical work is just a "light hearted way of seeing things." "I observe trends that are going too far, or are getting too established, that have lost their humor," he says. "I'm not just poking holes in something, I'm trying to create something new." When asked if he has despaired of satirizing the current political scene, he speaks with the wisdom of a man who has seen many swings of the political pendulum. "What is needed," he sums up, hopefully, in answer to the question, "is a Rush Limbaugh of the Left." He feels confident that one will appear.

Professionally speaking, Sam Wiener has succinctly summed up his very impressive career in his own prose on his résumé: "Sam Wiener was born in Shreveport, Louisiana. He studied architecture and art, with Josef Albers and Willem de Kooning, receiving a BFA from Yale School of Fine Arts in 1951. Following three years in the Navy and a year in Paris he settled in New York City. From 1955 until 1970, in addition to studio work, he com-

pleted some eighty commissions in a variety of materials, collaborating with many of the country's leading architects. Since that time he has concentrated on studio work, teaching, and exhibiting." Among the many galleries and museums which have featured his works are the Lamagna Gallery and Alternative Museum in New York, the Barbara Fiedler Gallery in Washington, D.C., the Aspen Center for the Visual Arts, the Vassar College of Art Gallery.

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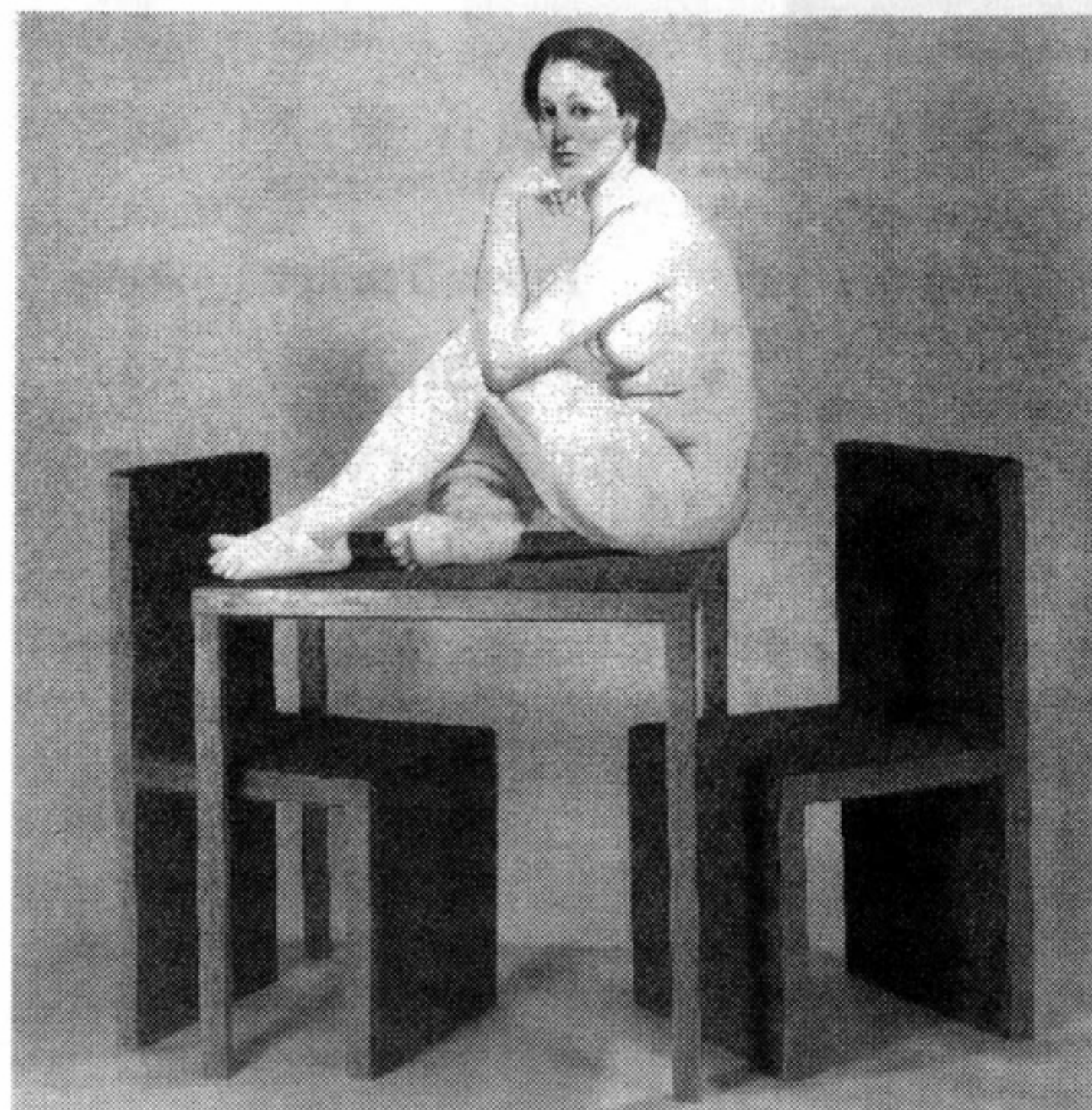
To his professional CV, we add that in 1967 Sam Wiener bought a loft in SoHo, which he still owns and to which he repairs with regularity ("I have to have a city somewhere in the vicinity," he admits standing with seeming contentment by his well-tended vegetable garden). He is married to arts educator/media consultant Maureen Gaffney.



"Pony Express," a mailbox designed by Wiener/Tabasco, is based upon Picasso's "Guernica."

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In addition to the derelict Miss Liberty, "Mondriaan Takes a Walk," a thriving bed of vegetables and an unassuming herb garden, the back yard has one other significant Wiener creation: a recreation space consisting of a hand-fashioned swing hung from the high limb of a tall tree and a small, child-friendly seesaw. Constructed for the occasional visit of his grandchildren, these modest toys in their agreeable sheltered setting seem hard to reconcile with that steel beam we saw jutting through the window of the Creative Arts Shop Gallery last September. ■



"Dejeuner sur l'Astroturf" is the title of this indoor picnic suite. The seated figure, titled "Dinette," is a life-sized version of one of the *deshabillés* in Edouard Manet's revolutionary painting.

Wiener is very difficult to classify. This is partly because he is master of an as yet undefined genre—let's call it three-dimensional satire—and partly it is because he is two people in one. His dual identity as Evangeline Tabasco and Sam Wiener, naturally, has a history. Like most things connected with this artist, this particular history is funny, and as Wiener himself [ves] tells it, full of self-irony. "In the 60s and 70s I was involved in Mail Art." Drawing a blank from his interviewer, Wiener explains that Mail Art, which was largely developed by Ray Johnson, grew out of Dadaism and one of its many progenies, Flux Art. Artists would mail each other stream-of-conscious impressions, and each artist would expand on the epistolary contents of his/her correspondent. "I found myself signing the