

TRIBUTE TO
IRVING
PETLIN



THE NATIONAL ARTS CLUB



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PETLIN

NOVEMBER 1, 2017 THRU JANUARY 4, 2018



THE NATIONAL ARTS CLUB

Prepared on the occasion of the exhibition
Irving Petlin: A Tribute Irving Petlin
November 1, 2017 — January 4, 2018

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It is an article of faith with me that good and true artists will always represent the human face and figure and presence until the end of time. Some will not. Those who will, as they always have, will transform the depictive art by power of unique gifts and character and personality and doggedness and luck and through the courtesy, as it were, of the time and place in which they live and interact. Do not be impatient with those of us like Petlin who are having to re-read our depictive history slowly, as if in this era of late modernism that history is written in a lost distant tongue.

—R.B. KITAJ, CATALONIA, 1977—



IRVING AND SON GABE AT MARTHA'S VINEYARD, CIRCA 1984

TRIBUTE TO IRVING PETLIN

Petlin shared with his contemporaries beginning in the fifties an aspiration to “investigate the reality” of our existence and its underlying ideological, philosophical, and moral assumptions. Petlin has refused to view ‘reality’ in isolation from the social, economic and political contingencies and historical contradictions. His early subjects, drawn from the experience of immigration and diaspora, reflect his anarchist, socialist, internationalist and republican leanings. In totality, his life’s work draws inspiration from a form of humanitarian socialism and an inability to portray anything in preconceived isolation. Petlin’s interest in the

psychological charge within the figure portrayed is well documented by his numerous portraits and interpretations of works including Primo Levi, Bruno Schultz, Edmund Jabes, Paul Celan, Michael Palmer, Elliot Weinberger, Meyer Shapiro, and numerous poets abroad.

In his 1937 essay *The Nature of Abstract Art* Meyer Schapiro wrote,

“There is no ‘pure art’ unconditioned by experience, all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience and by non-aesthetic concerns.”

Through the support and encouragement of the National Arts Club, two distinct bodies of work are being presented here. First, Petlin’s mastery as a draftsman and as a colorist is unmistakable in the pastel series entitled “Storms: After Redon” which due to Hurricane Sandy caused the cancellation of the viewing of these works, now formally being presented for the first time. Working on irregular sheets of handmade paper in the unforgiving but radiant medium of pastel, Petlin executes the act of drawing as a gamble between control and risk. Underlying the series is

Petlin's subtle and persistent commitment to history and its telling. Secondly, also on view here are a series of three epic paintings evidencing Petlin's commitment to referencing major historical developments in the tradition of Goya. *Revolution Pastorale* (1978-81), *Hebron* (1998-2001), *The Eleventh of January* (2009) are all signature works in Petlin's oeuvre.

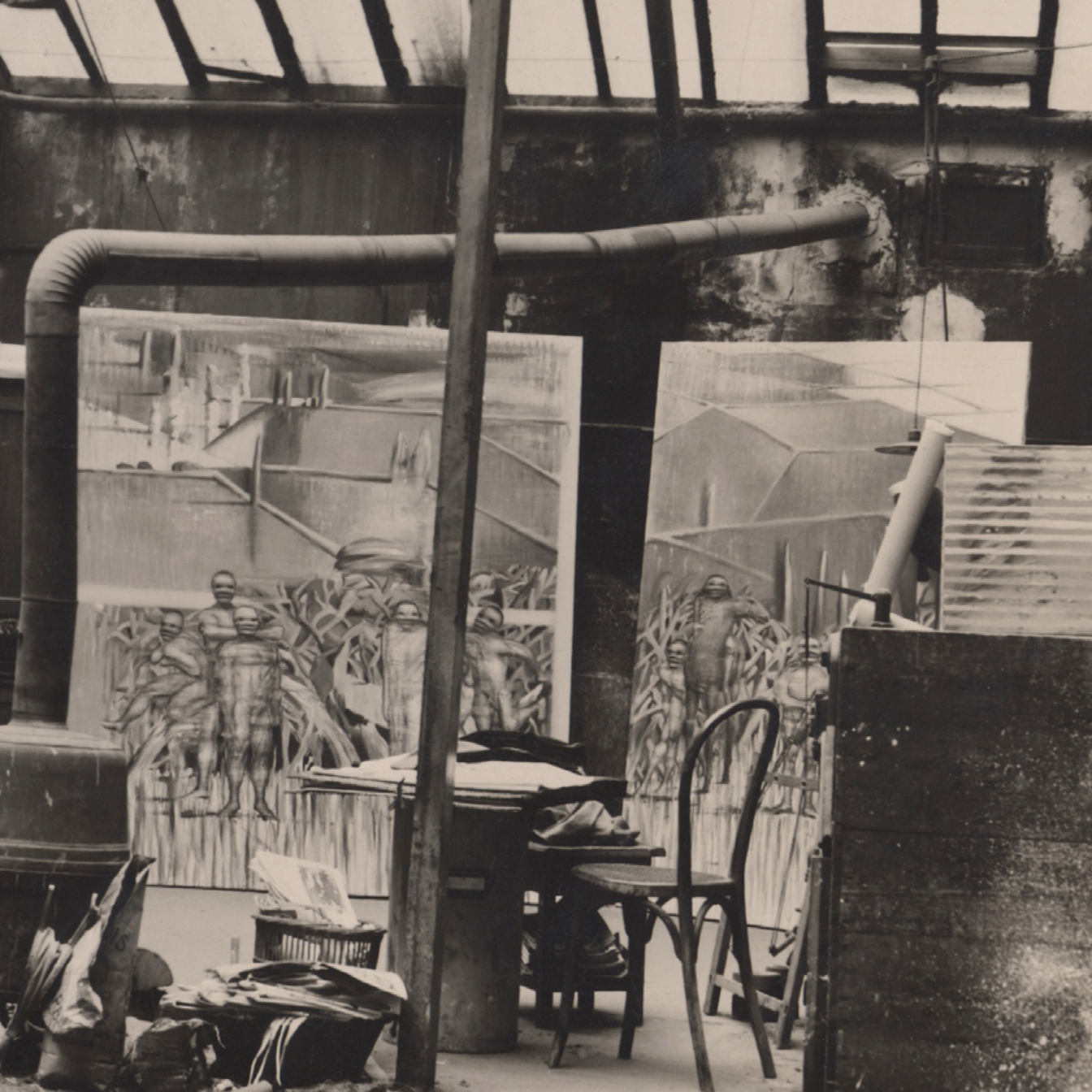
Special thanks to the members of the National Arts Club, to Robert Yahner and Jimmy Wright, to the following essays by distinguished colleagues of the artist, Max Kozloff and Jon Hendrick, and to the assistance of Rea David Tully.

D.K. WALLA



IRVING LOOKS AT HIS PAINTING OF MEYER SHAPIRO, INSTALLATION AT KENT FINE ART, 2014







ENCOUNTER AT THE MAISON DU PASTEL (DETAIL), 1983, OIL ON CANVAS, 71 X 50 IN.

IRVING PETLIN'S FACTURE

*To say to the painter that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say
to the player that he may sit on the piano.*

—JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER—

Painters often speak fondly of their medium, so why not recall for a moment what we mean by the word “paint?” It should be understood as a chromatic pigment immersed in its vehicle, usually oil, acrylic, or water. An artist handles it by means of a brush, sometimes a knife, rag or sponge and occasionally a finger that smears. On a surface, this pliant material can be loaded or thinned down, as wished. Misapplied paint frequently generates shapes or images that were unforeseen. I have visited an artist’s studio where left over dabs on his palette had jelled up impishly to figurine size. The artist in question is a seasoned

painter, Irving Petlin, wise to the fanciful potentials of oil, though his real sweetheart is pastel.

So, what is pastel? A dried paste made of pigment, ground with chalk and compounded with gum water, finished in sticks. One rubs or presses down these sticks upon rough textured paper—an action that visualizes gritty strokes and smudged zones of contact. Or, as the artist says vividly of his own process:

Sometimes there is no form under the hovering hand, no contour, no shape, but a crying out for a color to land and spread like a cloud. ...It is here that pastel is unique, softly spreading, bleeding to a nothingness undefined by boundary. The opposite happens when a sharp line of color is called for. The... stick must then draw an insistent, confident color line...one shot only, no second chances!

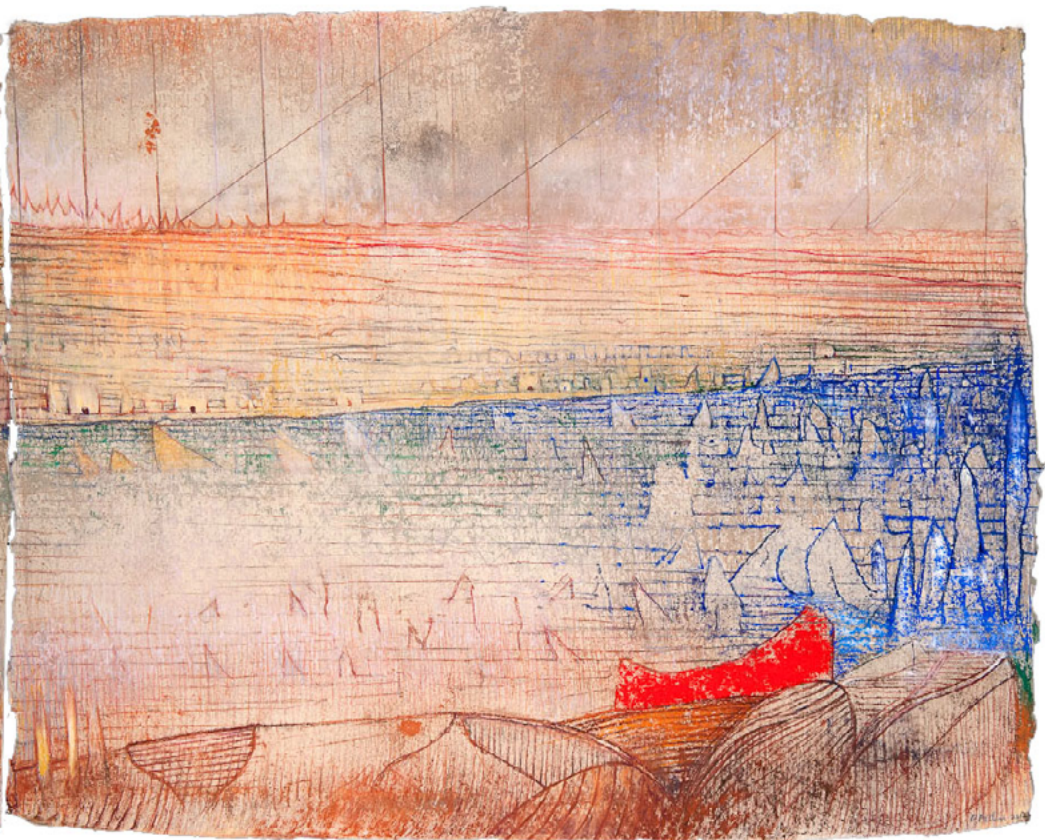
Pastel was once a convivial sketching tool for the Impressionists. Manet and Degas did well with it. Now, a contemporary artist uses



PHOTOGRAPH OF PASTELS TAKEN IN IRVING PETLIN'S STUDIO, 2017



THE NILE (FOR SARAH), 2012, PASTEL ON HANDMADE PAPER



MADE PAPER, DIPTYCH OVERALL: 35 X 55 15/16 IN.

pastel—challenged by what he regards as the medium's will of its own-- to visualize a state in which substance and space are bonded with each other. A wrong stroke and that possibility slips away or is instantly lost.

A number of the pastels he's recently created are diptychs, presented as if they're opened pages of ancient manuscripts, upon which some coherent depictions have survived. Their red brown tonality seems to have emerged as a result of the artist's palm bearing down, while their linearity speaks of intrusive, sharp contours that silhouette a narrative subject. Considering the granulated character and abrasive, unsettled meeting of touch and ground, the work might suggest an arid setting, perhaps a desert. That is why I was taken aback when viewing a Petlin pastel called *Towed to Sea* (1912).

Beneath the orange haze of twilight, an ocean liner is tugged out from port across a surface that looks—suspiciously—like water. Puffy black lines and dark smudges describe smoke issuing from the ship's four stacks, while beyond them the heavens are lit by rapturous flares.



TOWED TO SEA (1912), 2012, PASTEL ON HANDMADE PAPER, 28 X 35 IN.



ANGELS OF BROOKLYN, 2012, PASTEL ON HANDMADE PAPER, 39 1/2 X 27 5/8 IN.

Abruptly, the date of this pastel implies its subject: 2012, the centenary of the Titanic's maiden voyage during which it struck an iceberg and sank, at great cost of human life. Here, the white texture of the vessel anticipates the calamity to come.

Since it alludes to an historical event, and is based on a photograph, the image of this ghost ship has a certain credibility. But not if you look at the sky. While its multiple suns (one of them very bloody) are definitely cosmological, they leave us open the idea that the scene itself is extra terrestrial. Judging by the solar positions, over to the rear, the near side of the boat should have been in deep shadow, whereas here it fades into a pale, buoyant void.

In other pastels, the same thing happens to structures as familiar as the Brooklyn Bridge or the vernacular Parisian roof tops seen from Petlin's left bank studio window. Their outlines are firmly declared without any further acknowledgement that they're solid structures. Lacking density and volume, they act as contained areas of light itself. If you ask where this light comes from, or what is the source of its

energy, the pastels do not answer. One reckons only with the blur they leave, as a kind of bioluminescence, visible even in daylight hours, dimmed though it might be. Petlin's tableaux are visited by translucent superimpositions, in a manner that brings to mind double exposures or even 19th century spirit photography.

Over about fifty-five years, he has levered his practice with implications of dialogue—two terms, events, metaphors or states, that either sing together or are answerable to each other.

He teases viewers, for instance, with the sense that some of his latest works on paper date back in time, weathered by millennia of their prior existence. When cemeteries appear elsewhere, they, too, seem to have a long history, of which there remains little but the touching, abstracted evidence of headstones. He infers that the arrivals of people cannot happen unless preceded by their—sometimes urgent—departures, as in pictures of beached lifeboats and refugees on the move, their sad whereabouts undetermined. Yet this art is absorbed by the urban mode as much as it is with pastoral scenography. They



LANDING CHICAGO, 2012, PASTEL ON HANDMADE PAPER , DIPTYCH OVERALL: 35 X 55 1/8 IN.



ABANDONED FOREST (BROKEN BOAT), 2012, PASTEL ON HA

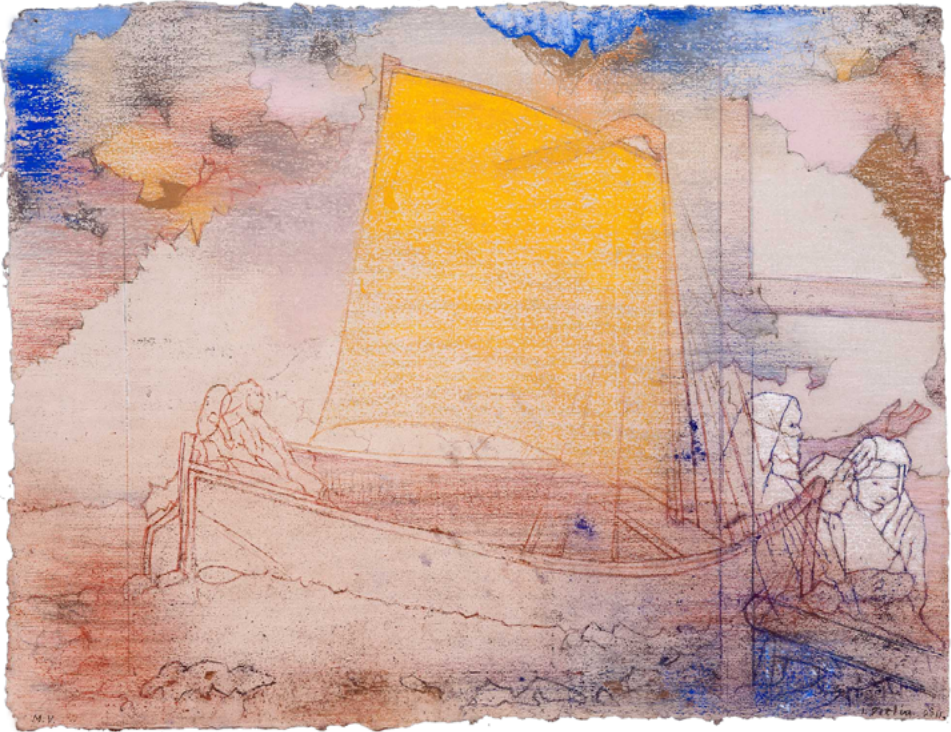


HANDMADE PAPER, TRIPTYCH OVERALL: 34 5/8 x 85 5/8 IN.

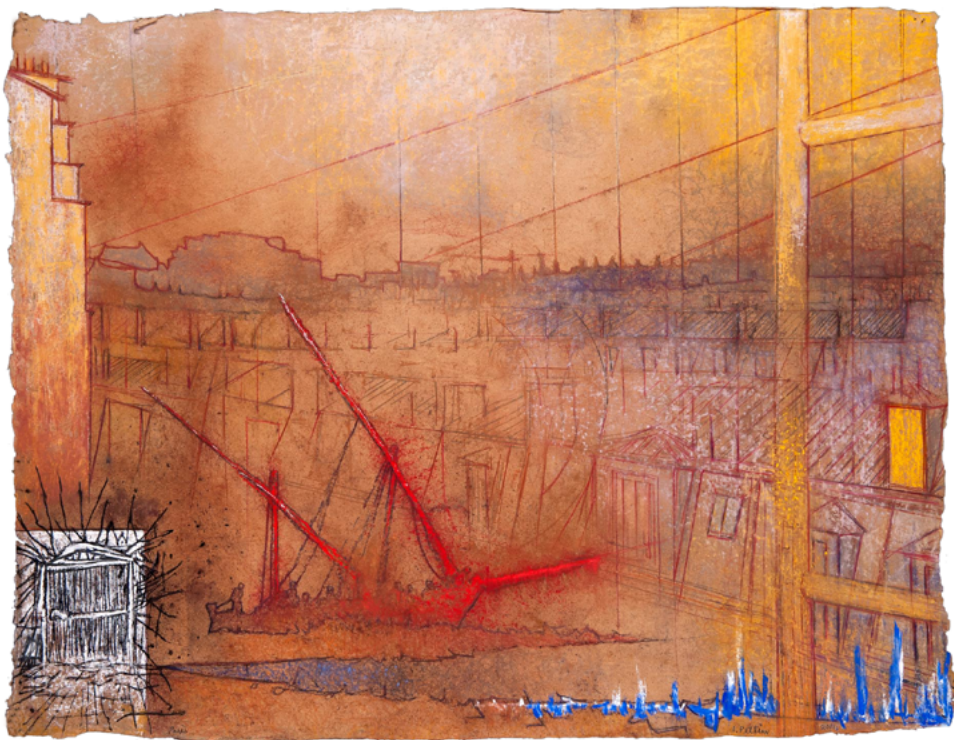
complement each other in nearby or distant vantages, though either way they're poignantly stranded by the retrospective cast of his mood.

As mists drift over an action or in close proximity to it, events seem etherealized by the texture of the pastel grain. The presumptions of first-hand witness give way to an aura of memories, infiltrated by biblical references or hints of more up to date occasions, such as the Holocaust. Time itself is dilated as a restless, substratum of consciousness, tinged with alarms. As if it was harmonized like music on base and treble staves, his art uses low toned atmospherics to contrast with spritely exposition.

Petlin's melding of disparate forms and timbres is further enriched by his living interface between two cultures, native and adopted. He made his longstanding, professional name in France; he vacations in Martha's Vineyard. This artist, resident in Paris, comes originally from Chicago. Born there in 1934, and trained at the school of the city's Art Institute, he became a younger member of the group later known for monster imagery.



YELLOW SAIL, 2012, PASTEL ON HANDMADE PAPER, 19 3/4 X 28 IN.



PARIS LANDING, 2012, PASTEL ON HANDMADE PAPER, 26 13/16 X 34 5/8 IN.

The trauma of the Second World War had left more than a trace in the grotesquerie of their images. Dubuffet's art brut they received most hospitably. Francis Bacon's contemporary paintings of a Pope with butchered animal carcasses, they regarded as red meat. For Irving Petlin, as well as his friends Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, it was not Cezanne's formal innovations but James Ensor's bitter satire that opened the portal to modern art. Edvard Munch's art also impacted upon the man who was to draw the Titanic. Some residue of Munch's spirit can be detected in visceral currents that twist through the gauze of Petlin's later pastels. In the matter of agitated background space, there was something for him to learn from Giacometti's barbed draftsmanship and Matta's velvet infinities. Finally, I should mention a much earlier artist who fits into this list of exemplary, model figures, for good reason.

Odilon Redon was an 1890's French Symbolist whose visionary work blossomed in rapport with his feeling for pastel. Like Petlin, he was sensitized by his medium, to the point of imagining it in live

reaction to his desire. When dark passages needed to be relieved, Redon rubbed light into them, as if it were a celestial glow. His auto-luminous faces and bodies have an apparitional presence, with an air about them of sacramental meditation. This is true even when the theme was of Greek legends, or a choice of motif like a flowery bouquet. In the end, he limned such subjects with the assurance that they were as enchanting as fairy tales.

Earlier than our 21st century, fairy tales went out of fashion. Nevertheless, the magic of special effects and the fantasies they engender hold sway in popular imagination. In one example, aliens of reptilian or robotic form enter our world with the unfriendly thought of obliterating us. The success of their apocalyptic genre depends on its entertainment value, manufactured with bravura technique. If they are to be truly entertaining, however, the aliens must look as real and solid, and “there”—as an earthling. For enjoyment’s sake, we have to discount the fact that they were contrived behind the scenes.

Art rarely arouses such disingenuous commitment because it is

understood to be symbolic or hypothetical or metaphoric by its very nature. Hand-made images are taken to be “special effects”, fictive in their own right and by common consent. That permission certainly allows a work to act as a door to another world, dreamy in its space, as Petlin’s is.

He stands out as an artist who confides his reveries rather than announces them. To a viewer, this confidentiality can work as seductive, privileged entrance to scenes that advance from, as well as recede into the depth of a poetic region. But there is nothing underhanded about this veiling motion. If you are not allowed to touch any of the represented figures, you can still see how they are palpably constructed, what his facture does to evince them, and what, in fact, the hand does with remarkable craftsmanship to create them. The work tells of invented possibilities and lost histories, but it also shows itself.

MAX KOZLOFF





on canvas, Diptych Overall: 108 x 168 in.

ON IRVING PETLIN

I met Irving Petlin on Mount Parnassus. He was walking there. It was 1960 or 1961 or 1962 or 1963. I know it was before 1964.

I was in love with Kate Manheim.

I combine the two events in my mind. I don't think Kate had any particular feelings toward me, but she did invite me to her home once, which was on Boulevard Montparnasse, or just around the corner on Boulevard Raspail. There were lots of books in her home. Her sister



IRVING AND SARAH IN PARIS, 1993

Nora was there. Kate was the most beautiful and vivacious woman on Montparnasse. She must have been 17 or 18 then.

When I think of Paris in those years, I think of Irving,

and I think of Kate.

Irving was from Chicago. There was a kind of Chicago clique in Paris then. Nancy Spero, Leon Golub, Joan Mitchell, Kes Zapkus, me, others. I visited Irving and his wife, the poet, Sarah Petlin, in their studio – giant coal burning stove and Irving's paintings everywhere. I don't remember children then. They came later.

It was the time of the Algerian War, bombs were going off in and around Paris, and the French police were being particularly brutal. Algerians would be found floating in the Seine.

We talked politics.

Irving is a brilliant analyst of world affairs – this, talking together, has continued for more than 50 years. Through American wars against Vietnam, American wars against the Salvadorians, American wars against Iraq, American wars against Afghanistan, American wars against so many, and, as artists, what could we do to stop our government from manipulating, controlling, suppressing, destroying peoples and cultures around the world.

The issues we discussed didn't stop there. They included the plight of Palestinians in Israel, artists' rights, free speech, abuse of state power, women's rights, African-American rights ... peoples' rights.

Somehow Irving found ways to engage the world with both his paintings and pastels, and with political action.

Raw Action, Direct Action, necessary action of many different types.

Things follow each other in quick succession:





D BELGIAN LINEN, DIPTYCH OVERALL: 84 X 192 IN.

the LA Peace Tower

Artists and Writers Protest Against the War in Vietnam

Collage of Indignation I

Art Workers' Coalition

Artists' Poster Committee

Collage of Indignation II

Artists Against US Intervention in Central America

Collage of Indignation III

Artists' Benefit for Attica Legal Defense Fund

There are more.

Many more.

Angry Arts

Appeal to Picasso to remove Guernica from MoMA and the US

And still more...

Artists were angry and Irving Petlin was always in the midst of the fray. Some of us found ways to work together on what needed to be done. There seemed to be several core individuals, not always the same, but frequently.

Irving and Leon Golub and Nancy Spero and Rudolf Baranik and more.

Irving and Lucy Lippard and more.





ON LINEN, DIPTYCH OVERALL: 78 X 108 IN.

Irving and Mark di Suvero and more.

Irving and Mary Frank and Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen and more.

Irving somehow was always in there with good ideas, strong ideas, practical ideas.

There were towers, and posters, and portfolios, and editions, and shows and benefits.

Form was dictated by needs, by strategy and design.

To provoke.

To attack.

To foment needed change.

To not let the fuckers get away with the shit that they were doing to destroy the world.

All through it, Irving found ways to return to his studio. Some of us left the studio, gave up on that system of communication. I did, but not Irving. He is a believer in the power of art using pigment and imagery, his imagery, to convey his anger about injustice.

Whether it be the treatment of Palestinians in Israel by Israelis, the torture of Iraqis by Americans, the manipulation and murder of Central Americans by American CIA forces. Oppressions are not safe from Irving Petlin's piercing vision and intellect, and not from his extraordinary sensitive hands – maneuvering charcoal, pigments, brushes – to create his personal moral landscape. A landscape peopled with victims and victimizers – sometimes a monochrome landscape scarred with color.

Irving's art is an art to live with, not taken in with causal glances at cocktail vernissages, or speedy looking.

The problem is that many are reluctant to let themselves be seduced by his art. They turn away, unsung by the beauty of the flame. Not wanting to see their own complicity depicted in the work. Consequently, this great artist is ignored by markets and cultural institutions that should be meeting their intended responsibilities of showing art with message, with meaning beyond aesthetic device.

Irving's messages cannot wait; they cannot linger for 50 years before finally being considered important. Unfortunately, his messages continue to be relevant as time moves on. So as institutional attitudes evolve and change, there are chances that they will catch up with the artist and his art. I would like to see retrospectives of his work in major museums in many countries around the world.

His work is relevant everywhere – there is no escaping responsibility for the condition of the world. All countries found justifications for colonialism, for invasion, for genocide, for exclusion, for racism, for exploitation, for profiting from war and human trafficking, for

destruction of swamps and continents, for pollution of springs and seas, for cultural genocide and linguistic extinction, for subjugation and for enslavement, for refusing sanctuary, for turning away, and for pretending not to see.

Not Irving...

JON HENDRICKS

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock
Art Institute of Chicago
Centre George Pompidou, Paris
Des Moines Art Center, Iowa
De Young Museum, San Francisco
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem
The Jewish Museum, New York
J.P. Morgan/Chase
Kemper Art Museum, Washington University, St. Louis
Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Musée des Beaux-Arts, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland (Donation François Ditesheim)
Museum der Stadt, Recklinghausen, Germany
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia
Philadelphia Museum of Art
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



IRVING IN HIS PARIS STUDIO, CIRCA 1960S



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