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Take Another Look: Irving Sandler in Conversation with Franklin Einspruch

by Franklin Einspruch

***Irving Sandler: Out of Tenth Street and Into the 1960s* at Loretta Howard Gallery, September 4th to October 11th, 2014**

While there are only eight objects on display in "Irving Sandler: Out of Tenth Street and Into the 1960s" at Loretta Howard Galle
and power of each of them. Together they form a sacra conversazione *of high modernism. A large-scale Ronald Bladen and a small, two-part George Sugarman share a visual sensibility but differ wholly in attitude. Phillip Pearlstein and Al Held meet along two adjacent walls and trade ideas about how to use large shapes to divide the rectangle. Paintings by Alex Katz, Lois Dodd, and Alice Neel discuss their commonalities in figuration, while a faintly figurative Mark di Suvero sculpture holds itself aloof.*

At the center of this conversation is Irving Sandler, who witnessed the labors of these artists as they set down their individual paths in the late '50s and early '60s. With figures such as de Kooning and Pollock having established themselves as giants, there was enormous interest in – and heated arguments about – what younger artists were to do in their wake. On the eve of the show I spoke with Sandler in his Greenwich Village apartment not far from where it all happened a half-century ago.

Lois Dodd, Apple Tree, 1964. Oil on linen, 54 x 74 inches. © Lois Dodd, courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York

Franklin Einspruch: The exhibition at Loretta Howard Gallery represents a fascinating time, in which some of the most important developments in modern art are taking place around a tiny cluster of cooperative galleries on Tenth Street. Ambitious artists with big personalities are lending their elbow grease to make it all work.

Irving Sandler: Tanager Gallery started in 1952 and moved up to Tenth Street in '54. I worked there from '56 until around '59. The artists in Tanager, I grew up with them – Philip Pearlstein, Alex Katz, Lois Dodd. Mostly Phillip and Alex. Across the street you had Brata Gallery, which had George Sugarman, Ronald Bladen, and Al Held. They became very close friends, all three. They were my closest friends on Tenth Street except for Mark di Suvero, who was next door from Brata, at the March Gallery. So these were my guys, this show I put together. I thought I chose pretty terrific artists to be best friends with.

Of course, Alice Neel was older and pretty mean. She constantly needled me for not writing about her. But I wanted her in the show to indicate that Tenth Street was not one thing. Clement Greenberg identified something called the Tenth Street Touch, which he meant as the School of de Kooning, or action or gesture painting, but it wasn't all like that. There were 200 artists showing there. Art was very much all over the place. Although there was a dominant style and that was gestural painting.

By the time Greenberg was referring to the Tenth Street Touch, he meant it as a pejorative.

Definitely. We all considered it a pejorative. People began to regard gestural painting as having run its course by '58. Greenberg of course was promoting – I use that word "promoting" deliberately – color field abstraction. Here in the apartment we have one artist who probably did it first in '52, Ben Isquith, now all but forgotten.

But by 1958, certain artists, particularly the guys in the Loretta Howard show, felt that gestural abstraction was used up. Katz and Pearlstein thought that figuration was in crisis, and that they had to move it towards literalism, fact, and specificity. For Ronnie Bladen and George Sugarman, welded construction didn't offer any new possibilities and they began to do other things. There was no consensus, but they felt for personal reasons that they wanted to do something new.

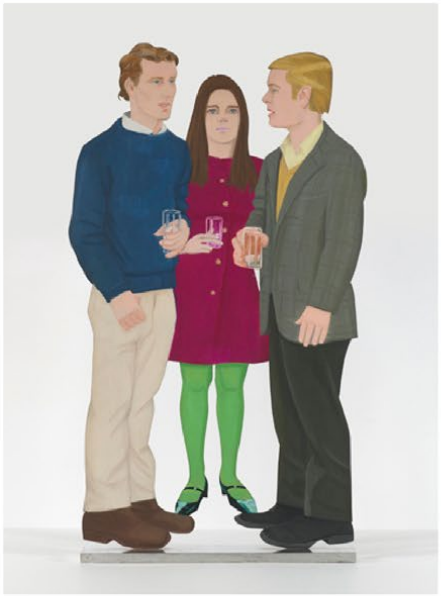
Of course there was Robert Chamberlain working in kind of an action or abstract-expressionist mode. There was also di Suvero. But they were thinking of people like David Hare and Ibram Lassaw. These were leading sculptors of the '50s, now forgotten. Theodore Roszack and Seymour Lipton have had major shows of their work. Hare not yet, Lassaw not yet.

You've seen contemporary art history operating for long enough to have witnessed some artists getting taken into the institutions and preserved, while other artists are forgotten. Is that process historical and thus in some way fair, or is it more political and arbitrary?

It's hard to say. My next book will be about that, why styles change. There's an audience that wants for reasons of its own to see new pictures. It's these reasons I'm trying at this point to figure out. Of the group who became the so-called New Realists, Katz has become the most prominent. Do I think it was justified? Absolutely. Phillip too in an entirely different way.

How about the people who have been forgotten?

I don't think that's at all justified, it just happens. Some of these people are very fine artists. There are older abstract expressionists, artists like Bradley Walker Tomlin, who's wonderful, or James Brooks, or William Baziotes, who in their time were considered major figures. But it seems that art history has a way of constantly narrowing the field, and wonderful artists end up languishing in doctoral dissertations. But they can be rehabilitated.



Alex Katz, J.J., Clarice, and Joe , 1965. Oil on aluminum, 59 x 29 inches. Courtesy of Alex Katz

Does that winnowing process happen in the same way as it used to?

I don't know. We are in a time of such total pluralism, it's hard to know why lightning strikes where it does. In my day, in the days of high modernism, things developed rather more regularly and we could see a kind of progression. That didn't mean that we liked it, and that didn't mean that we didn't go out and really hammer it, because it was competition. I think of my response to Frank Stella, for example, which was: if that's art, then anything I stand for is something else, and vice versa. But we very quickly saw why it was happening, and the necessity for it.

But after 1970 it becomes very difficult to understand. The modernist era splays open. I wrote that at one point it looked like a mainstream, and now it looks like a delta. It's all over the place. There's nothing wrong with that, it makes artists freer than ever before. The problem is, how do you get attention? My students put that up as the major problem of their careers, to get somebody to look at their work.

It's hard to comprehend how much larger the art world is now than it was in 1958.

In 1959, when I counted, the entire New York school consisted of, at tops, 250 artists, probably closer to 200. You could know everybody. I knew everybody. There were twenty galleries worth seeing, and you could visit them all in an afternoon. There are what, 600 galleries now? In Bushwick, upwards of fifty! We didn't have to look past Manhattan. And we had a community, a real community. These 200 people had The Club, which I ran from 1956 to 1962. We had our bar, the Cedar Tavern. There were the openings, and there were constant studio visits. We were geographically concentrated in a very small neighborhood.

Today it's all over the place. That's why I said that past the 1970s, I followed developments closely, but I can't think of it in the same way as I did before. It's very difficult for artists to come up with anything new in the modern sense. They can make wonderful art, and there's a great deal of wonderful art around. But you go to Chelsea today and you have to move fast, there's so much to see. Your whole way of looking has changed. You can't stop too long.

If you visit twenty galleries, you'll see nineteen shows that are okay, maybe. A lot of them are bad, and the rest are nothing to change your life. From this you can conclude that American art is in the pits, that nineteen out of twenty shows didn't move you, or you can say, "Hey, wow, that one show!" Take your choice, it's the donut or the hole.

Which way do you lean, the donut or the hole?

Oh, I definitely lean to the donut. I cannot believe, many of my former best friends notwithstanding, that art suddenly stopped short. There's more of it, and much of it is really very good.

How important is community to the advancement of art? You could look at the show at Loretta Howard and theorize that you need the likes of Dodd and Katz and Pearlstein together, that caliber of character and intensity of connection, in order to make art go forward.

You see, you're talking about a modernist idea. I'm not sure whether art goes forward. At one time we thought it should go forward, and there was an avant-garde, and we were embattled, and among ourselves we fought bitterly. But I don't think art goes forward. It's either interesting or not, moving or not.

Is it possible that art was moving forward in 1959, but after 1970 it stopped?

I think so, or it moved in different directions, and you could see a kind of progression, but only in retrospect.

If you were an advocate of abstract expressionism as I was, and then in 1959 you were suddenly confronted with the black paintings of Frank Stella, that was another world. If you were committed to art, you were shaken up. The same thing with Warhol and Lichtenstein and Rosenquist, particularly Warhol in 1962. Even artists who weren't quite that radical but in their own way using common objects like Oldenberg and Dine, that stuff looked unprecedented. Our idea was that high art and low art just didn't meet. Read early Greenberg and early Rosenberg on that – they called it kitsch.

Doesn't Alex Katz's work touch on that overlap? It must have been a bit of a shock at first to see him doing those aluminum constructions like the one at Loretta Howard.

Katz is an artist who is absolutely attuned to what he sees around him. He notices billboards and widescreen movies. He understands fashion, and how fashion changes. He is aware of being contemporary. Baudelaire's idea of the dandy. Not that he's a dandy, but he has the attitude of the *flâneur*.

Whereas Phillip Pearlstein is looking backward.

I see what you mean. Phillip looked back to the history of the nude and tried to figure out what had to be done. That turned out to be of interest to Pop artists and the hard-edge people, in that he had taken the painterly image like those of Elaine de Kooning and he made it specific.

Al Held, Echo, 1966. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 72 inches. Courtesy of Al Held Foundation, Inc. Photo courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York

There were all these arguments going on among the artists and the critics, and of course that's part of the fun. But my suspicion is that people find that they have more and more in common as time goes on.

I don't think they think so, but I think so. Al Held and Phillip Pearlstein, who were close friends, were aesthetic enemies. Pearlstein stood for realism, Al stood for hard edge abstraction, and they were at one another's throats. They wouldn't show together, but I showed them together at Cunningham Gallery because I was interested in the affinities.

Both you and Phillip Pearlstein were in the military. How long did you serve?

Three and a half years, in the Second World War. I enlisted in '43 and got out in '46. I was supposed to do the invasion of Japan, and was supposed to be killed, which had we landed would have happened in fifteen seconds. But Phillip was in Italy. I don't think he saw combat, I certainly didn't. After sixty or seventy years I still carry this.

For the record, I'm looking at Irving Sandler's United States Marine Corps Certificate of Satisfactory Service. He is ranked as a lieutenant and identified by his thumbprint.

It's called a Good Conduct Discharge. It happened so long ago they hadn't even invented photography. Being a Marine changed my life, but that's another world, and my memoir doesn't go into any of it.

Was your going into the art world a reaction against your military experience?

Absolutely not. I enlisted when I was 17. When I was commissioned I was probably the youngest officer in the Marine Corps. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I loved the Marine Corps. Because they brainwash you, a lot of that love remains. I remember during the Gulf War, General Schwarzkopf punched the First and Second Marines through the Iraqi lines. The Second Marines was my marines. What an upsurge of pride! So those feelings are still there.

And yet the intellectual atmosphere around your artistic milieu was communist. There was a burgeoning interest in Marxism.

Well, that would have been earlier on, in the '30s and '40s into the '50s. In the '60s everything changed, and it became political, in a countercultural way.

But we could do something back on Tenth Street that you can't do anymore. We could live on nothing, and have the so-called Bohemian life. My rent was $17 a month. You could get a good studio for $30 a month. At a dollar an hour you could pay your rent in seventeen hours. You were free! We could just look, do what we wanted, and try to find what it was that we wanted to do. And I found art.

Is the art world more political than it used to be?

Oh yeah. As a matter of fact, because of the hangover of social realism, the art world as I knew it tended to be relatively apolitical. Politics were not discussed at The Club. There was a kind of indifference to it. We talked about art, not politics.

What were the circumstances of your coming into Tanager?

I decided to enter the art world after an epiphany in front of Franz Klein's "Chief" at the Museum of Modern Art. I didn't know quite how to do it, but I knew I wanted to know more about it, and as I said I was free to figure it out.

After that a lot of accidents happened. I went up to Provincetown with a girlfriend. We were supposed to camp out on the dunes. One night of that and we got a place in town, and I got a job as a dishwasher at Moors, a very fine Portuguese restaurant. One of the waiters was Angelo Ippolito, who a member at Tanager Gallery. We became friends. When we came down to New York he got me a job at the Tanager. They needed a sitter. So I worked there, and was really well paid – $20 a week. This was when my rent was $17 a month.

I went to the Cedar Street Tavern every night, and nursed one 15-cent beer the whole evening. Even after I got married in '58 I still went. I got to know artists and listened to them, and got invited to galleries. But working at the Tanager was my real entry.

Anything that had to be done in the art world that nobody wanted to do, I did. So when The Club was on its last legs in 1955, there was a meeting to disband it. Elaine de Kooning said, "This has been going on since 1949. It would be wonderful if we could keep it going, if only someone would volunteer." Silence. Then I said, "I'll do it." So not only was I running Tanager, I was running The Club, and soon after I was writing for *Art News*.

George Sugarman, Yellow and White, 1967. Oil on Wood, in two parts, 25-1/2 x 35-1/2 x 27-1/2 each. © Estate of George Sugarman, courtesy Gary Snyder Gallery, New York

What was the attitude about criticism at the time?

We critics were sort of mildly inferior people. However, people like Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg were major intellectuals, and public intellectuals. They would be treated differently than someone like myself who was a kid on the scene. But the artists also liked admirers, and they liked whipping boys, and we fulfilled both functions quite well. Though Tom Hess, him you didn't mess with because he was very smart and very fast and he ran *Art News*.

There was an interesting mixture of condescension and awe.

More condescension than awe. If you wrote a bad review, you made an enemy for life. If you wrote a good review, it was just assumed the artist deserved it. You couldn't win either way. But that was okay because at one point I decided to write a history of abstract expressionism, *The Triumph of American Painting*, and for that I needed these guys. The information had to come directly from the artists. If I got condescended to, okay. Luckily I'm the kind of person who never knew when he was being condescended to, a quality which infuriates my wife. It never bothered me.

In contrast with other writers we associate with that era, you have a communitarian spirit. It's almost as if you regard artists as family.

Yes. Criticism can be a lot of things. At *Art News* I could assume that the audience was sophisticated, and I only had to write reviews of a hundred to 300 words. But when I became the critic for the *New York Post*, my function as I saw it was to educate. I really didn't care about what was good and what was bad. I wanted to know what the art *was* and present it to the public. The judgment came in when I chose what to write about. If I didn't like an artist's work I just didn't write about it. Unless he was a big gun, and then I'd run after him. If I thought the reputation was unmerited he was fair game.

That's the situation we're in now in criticism, with so many artists working. The decision to write about one of them is the first and main act of judgment.

Art critics have been sidelined by the market. In the 1950s, when there was really no audience outside of our own group, taste was made by artists. De Kooning was considered one of the great artists because artists thought he was a great artist. In the '60s, art critics, particularly the younger art critics in debt to Greenberg and writing for *Artforum*, became arbiters of taste. And then in the late '60s the collectors and the dealers became the tastemakers. Now a handful of billionaires are determining taste by commanding attention.

Did you feel at some point that you had to deliberately cultivate a voice? Did you look at other writers to emulate or not emulate?

I personally didn't. I think the critic-poets in the '50s like John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara probably did. Frank became a model for younger critics like Bill Berkson. No, I had another process. I had no sense of style. I still don't. I figured the only thing I could do was make my writing as clear as I could, and that's what I did. No jargon, no bullshit, just make it clear. It was a terrible struggle to put down what I wanted to say in words that other people would understand.

The simple process of turning a visual experience into a verbal experience is difficult. Jargon can sneak in. Bullshit can sneak in. You get to talking about spirituality or God or all sorts of other nonsense. Although that's what you're really trying to say!

Did that put you at odds with what the artists wanted you to write about them? Bladen, I know, had a spiritual streak.

In Bladen's case he did all sorts of specific things I could point to and say, "Hey, that looks spiritual." You could know what I meant. Hans Hofmann said that when you put two colors together they create a sense of the third. That third color isn't there, so it has to be spiritual, right? So you can do that.

What are the takeaway lessons for the contemporary art world in the exhibition up at Loretta Howard Gallery?

That's a very interesting question. One of the things I was interested in was how fresh and terrific the work looked. In terms of the contemporary experience, I really don't know. This is my history, and it's the artists' history. A few of the artists in the show no longer have the kinds of reputations they had in the past, and I like the idea of rehabilitating them. Even Bladen. Sugarman, possibly more. Of course neither Katz nor di Suvero need it, they remain very much in the public's eye. Lois, who's got a slowly building reputation, I would like to see more of her work. She is really very good. As a person she is about as modest as they come. She doesn't say much, but she paints beautiful paintings.

It's much harder today than it was back then because there were relatively so few artists. But I think that would be my main idea, to bring these guys up and say, "Hey, take another look."