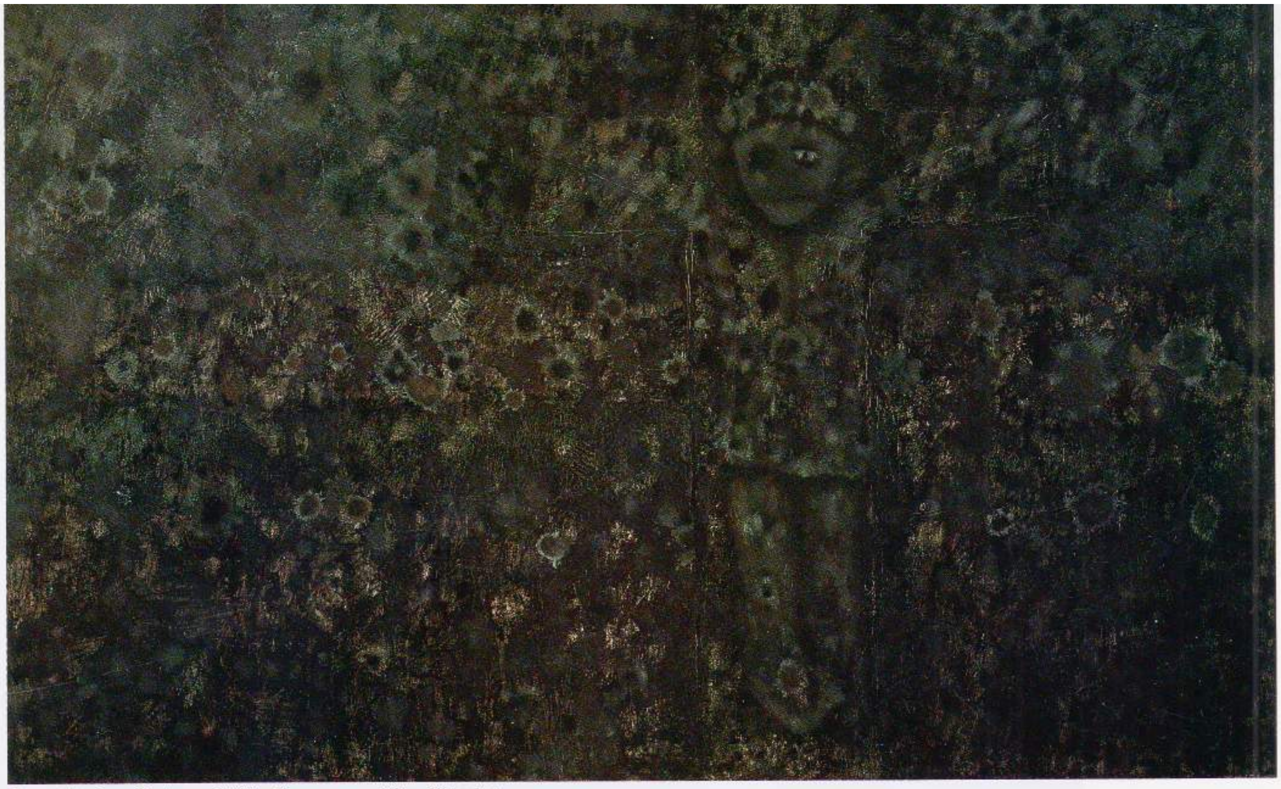
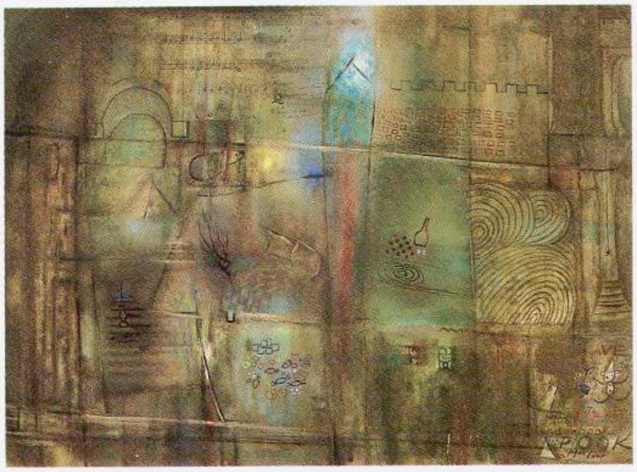


Loren MacIver: Bretagne, *1965, oil on canvas, 45 by 71 inches.*

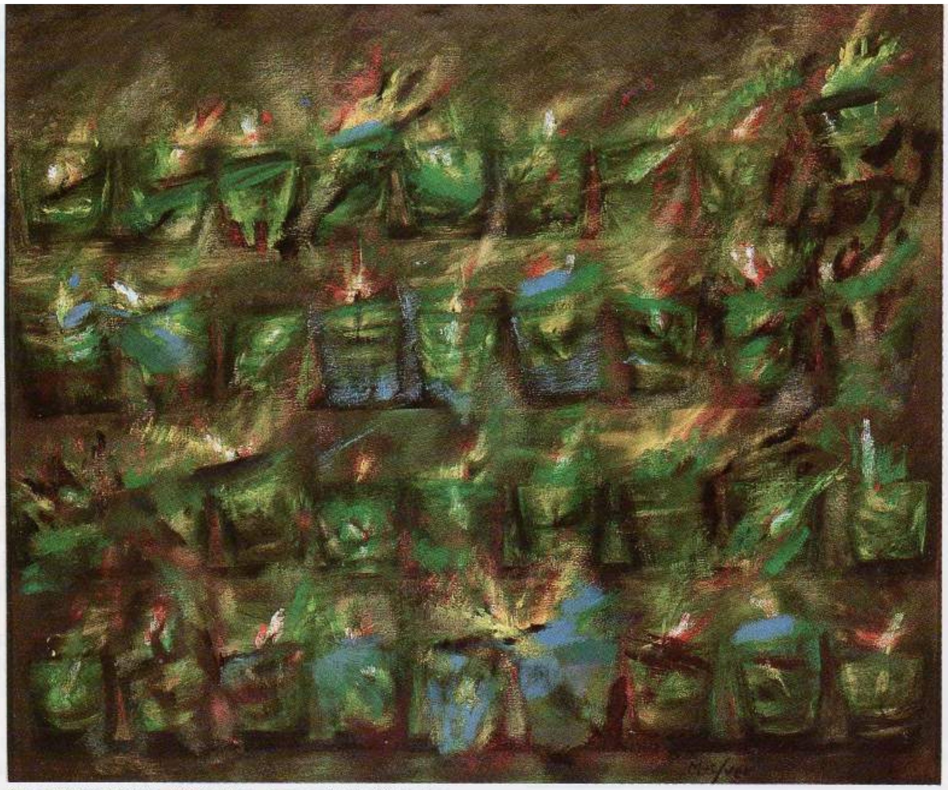


My House, *1936,*
oil on canvas, 25 by 34 inches.

MacIver's Luminous Visions

Since first garnering critical acclaim in the 1930s, New York painter Loren MacIver has specialized in still lifes, landscapes and city views that convey dreamlike impressions of the world around her

BY ROBERT G. EDELMAN

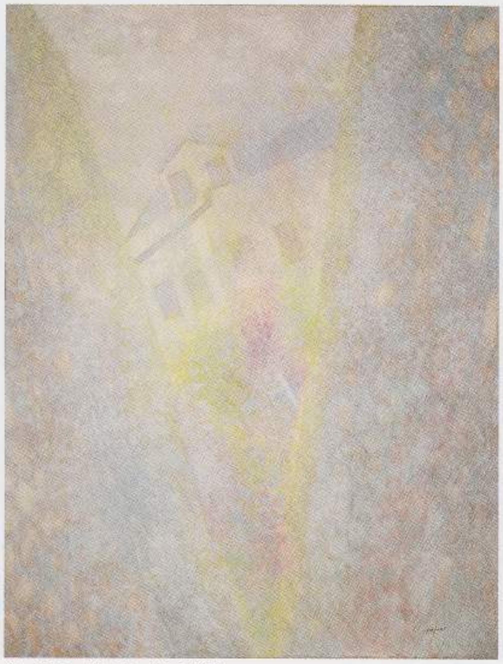


Green Votive Lights, *1980, oil on canvas, 22 by 26 inches.*

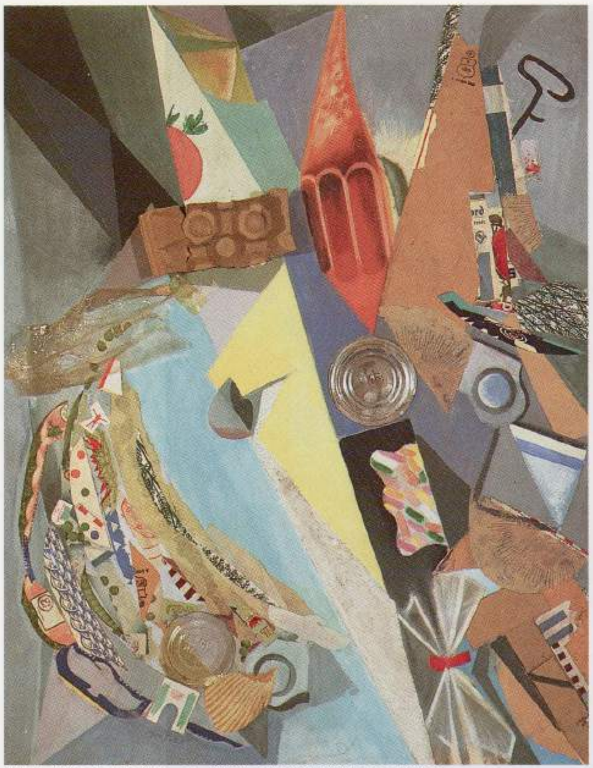
Loren MacIver is one of a small, select group of American women painters, including Georgia O'Keeffe, Hedda Sterne, Isabel Bishop and Irene Rice Pereira, who won significant critical praise for their work before the advent of Abstract Expressionism. Like these artists, MacIver pursued her particular concerns without being swayed by the changes taking place in the art world around her. With a modest but conscientious selection of important works by MacIver recently on view at Terry Dintenfass [Oct. 7-Nov. 6, 1993], it would seem to be a particularly opportune moment to reassess the career of this native New York artist.

The exhibition, sampling nearly five decades of work, clearly demonstrates that MacIver, now 84, found her modus operandi early in her artistic life and remained faithful to it in both style and subject. The most immediately striking features of her small to medium-size paintings are a certain delicacy of touch and a brilliant luminosity. She achieves the latter by employing a slow build-up of thin glazes, combined with areas of stippled and daubed pure hues. In fact, MacIver's mature work could be described as a kind of Magic Impressionism, her dreamlike visions seemingly observed through a veil or mist of diaphanous washes. However, this radiant evanescence is counterbalanced by a darker, more solemn aspect in some of her major paintings, such as *Bretagne* (1965). MacIver's most affecting images are those that incorporate both sides of the artist's temperament.

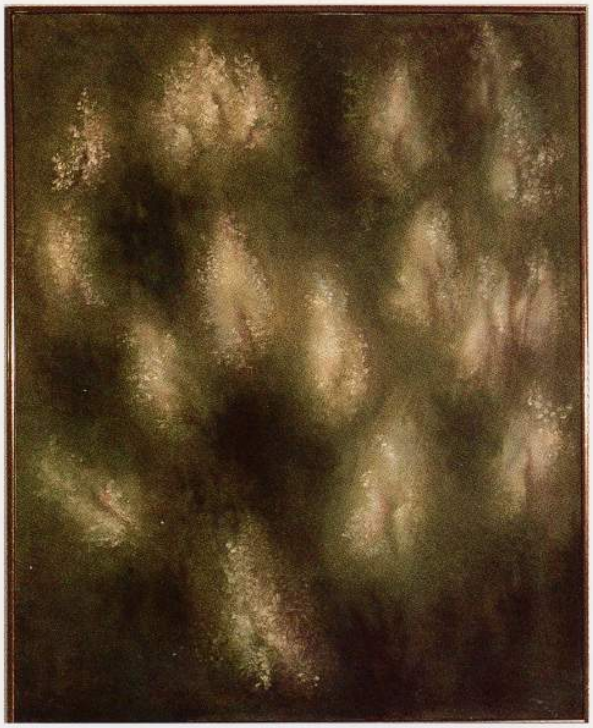
MacIver received her only technical training as an artist when she was 10, attending weekend classes at the Art Students League. Years later she spent summers on Cape Cod living in a homemade driftwood shack, a painting of which was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1935 when her husband, the poet Lloyd Frankenberg, walked into



St. Medard la Mouffe, *1967, oil on canvas, 57¾ by 45 inches.*



Egg—The Beginning, *ca. 1954, collage with egg carton, 23¾ by 20½ inches.*



Fleurs de marronniers, *1963, oil on canvas, 64 by 51¼ inches.*

MacIver has a passionate regard for inanimate objects; she retains a poet's fascination with the details that lend a thing its identity.

Alfred Barr's office and sold him two canvases (Barr kept one for his own collection). MacIver worked under the Federal Arts Project in the '30s, lived in Greenwich Village and then briefly in Key West. Her painting in those years went through phases of semi-abstraction, experiments that were by turns expressionistic and decorative, without altogether sacrificing her ethereal imagery.

The influence of Paul Klee, an artist MacIver has cited as an early source of inspiration, is apparent in *My House*, a small painting from 1936. MacIver recognized in Klee a sensibility akin to her own. Like Klee, MacIver resisted crossing over to pure abstraction. And she, too, sought to devise a pictorial vocabulary with which she could translate her immediate surroundings. In this haunting work, for example, light emanates from inside MacIver's pictographic arrangement of castle walls, doorways and mysterious chambers. A few floating bars of a Chopin piece hover above a stairway that disappears into a yellow haze. Each room has its particular enticement: clusters of candies and toys, a bed with plump pillows, a distant window with a potted plant, an oil lamp on the stairs, a spider dangling from the ceiling of a narrow hall. The embrace of familiar objects and places is a constant theme in MacIver's work, reflecting a blend of meditative observation and lyrical interpretation. She succeeds in instilling transient entities with a shimmering inner life, at once potent and fragile.

During the '40s, MacIver began to give shape to her unique vision. Living once again in New York, she returned to city motifs. Her pictures of urban life incorporate neighborhood images that she was to reuse many times: pushcarts, rows of tenement buildings, shop windows, rooftop chimney pots, the occasional tree. Initially these elements were arranged in a frieze, like simplified hieroglyphs, a linear accounting of local activity. At other times, scenes were viewed from above, the bird's-eye perspective allowing MacIver to construct an intricate web of street bustle. The city itself became the grid, the construct within which MacIver placed her delicate notations. She found substance in the most innocuous of places. Cracks in the sidewalk, a pattern of bricks or the glass disks at a subway entrance were subject enough for her acute investigations.

In an important painting from 1943, *Red Votive Lights* (not included in the Terry Dintenfass exhibition), MacIver reduced this loaded motif to a repeating pattern of rows of cups, some with illuminated candles, flickering in a shadowy space. She was to return to this theme several times, most recently in 1980-81 with a sequence of green glass candles in much the same arrangement. The differences between this painting and earlier works, separated by nearly 40 years, are subtle but revealing. In *Green Votive Lights*, the candles are lit with dancing flames, the glasses sway in a playful rhythm. MacIver activates these holy lights. In their vitality they personify the artist's passionate regard for inanimate objects and recall the mood encountered in Marsden Hartley's poignant Maine still lifes. MacIver's intense focus strips away appearances, plumbs the depths of an object's nature. Over the years, she has retained a poet's fascination with the details that lend things their identity; through the act of painting these objects, she rediscovers them.

During the early '40s, MacIver began her 50-year association with the Pierre Matisse Gallery, which continued until the gallery's recent closing. In 1945, she had her first solo museum exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art; it was followed the next year by an important group show, "Fourteen Americans," one of a series curated by Dorothy Miller at MOMA, that included the work of Tobey, Gorky, Motherwell, Noguchi and Pereira. Her first trip to Europe in 1948 resulted in many rudimentary sketches

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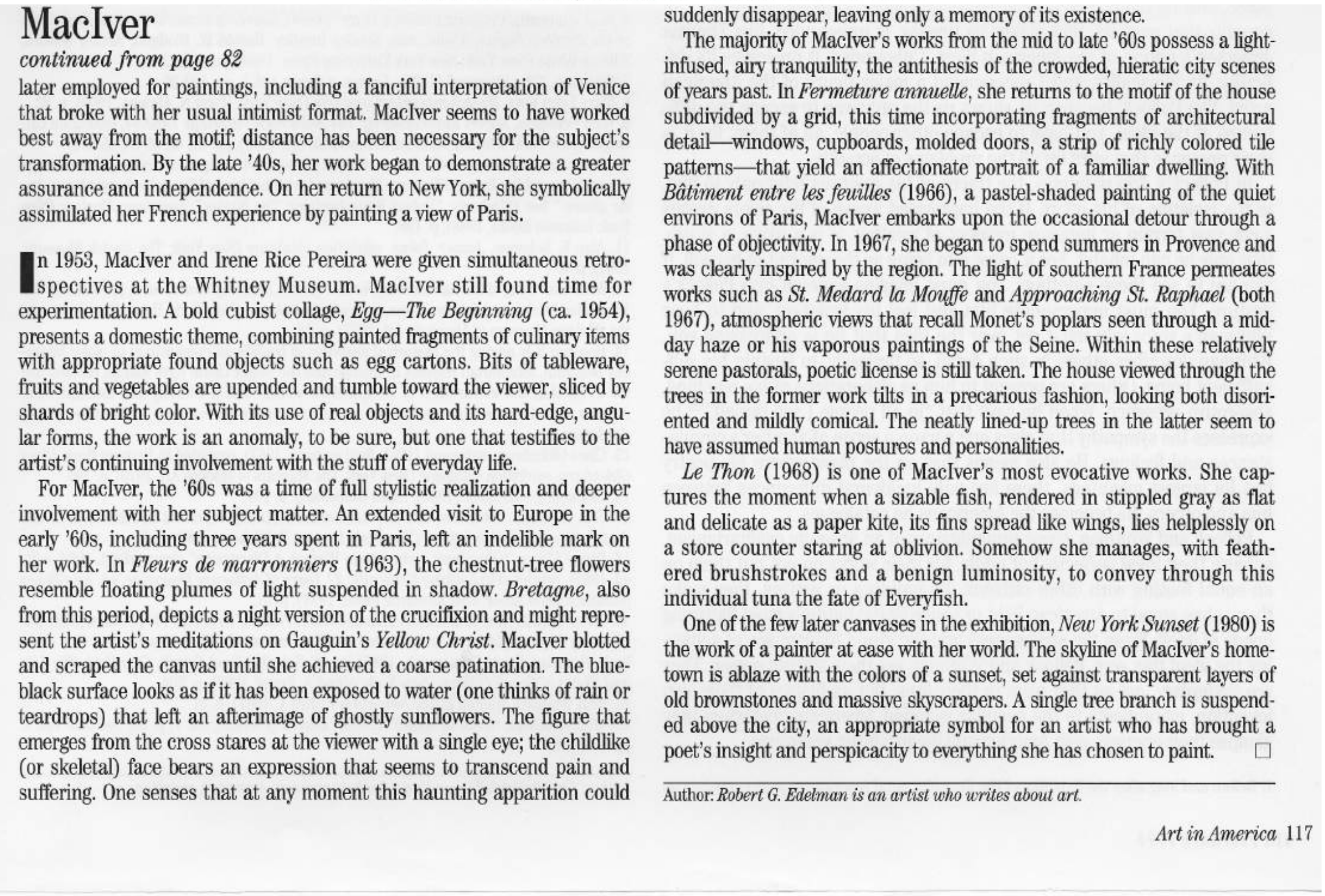

MacIver

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later employed for paintings, including a fanciful interpretation of Venice that broke with her usual intimist format. MacIver seems to have worked best away from the motif; distance has been necessary for the subject's transformation. By the late '40s, her work began to demonstrate a greater assurance and independence. On her return to New York, she symbolically assimilated her French experience by painting a view of Paris.

In 1953, MacIver and Irene Rice Pereira were given simultaneous retrospectives at the Whitney Museum. MacIver still found time for experimentation. A bold cubist collage, *Egg—The Beginning* (ca. 1954), presents a domestic theme, combining painted fragments of culinary items with appropriate found objects such as egg cartons. Bits of tableware, fruits and vegetables are upended and tumble toward the viewer, sliced by shards of bright color. With its use of real objects and its hard-edge, angular forms, the work is an anomaly, to be sure, but one that testifies to the artist's continuing involvement with the stuff of everyday life.

For MacIver, the '60s was a time of full stylistic realization and deeper involvement with her subject matter. An extended visit to Europe in the early '60s, including three years spent in Paris, left an indelible mark on her work. In *Fleurs de marronniers* (1963), the chestnut-tree flowers resemble floating plumes of light suspended in shadow. *Bretagne*, also from this period, depicts a night version of the crucifixion and might represent the artist's meditations on Gauguin's *Yellow Christ*. MacIver blotted and scraped the canvas until she achieved a coarse patination. The blue-black surface looks as if it has been exposed to water (one thinks of rain or teardrops) that left an afterimage of ghostly sunflowers. The figure that emerges from the cross stares at the viewer with a single eye; the childlike (or skeletal) face bears an expression that seems to transcend pain and suffering. One senses that at any moment this haunting apparition could suddenly disappear, leaving only a memory of its existence.

The majority of MacIver's works from the mid to late '60s possess a light-infused, airy tranquility, the antithesis of the crowded, hieratic city scenes of years past. In *Fermeture annuelle*, she returns to the motif of the house subdivided by a grid, this time incorporating fragments of architectural detail—windows, cupboards, molded doors, a strip of richly colored tile patterns—that yield an affectionate portrait of a familiar dwelling. With *Bâtiment entre les feuilles* (1966), a pastel-shaded painting of the quiet environs of Paris, MacIver embarks upon the occasional detour through a phase of objectivity. In 1967, she began to spend summers in Provence and was clearly inspired by the region. The light of southern France permeates works such as *St. Medard la Mouffe* and *Approaching St. Raphael* (both 1967), atmospheric views that recall Monet's poplars seen through a mid-day haze or his vaporous paintings of the Seine. Within these relatively serene pastorals, poetic license is still taken. The house viewed through the trees in the former work tilts in a precarious fashion, looking both disoriented and mildly comical. The neatly lined-up trees in the latter seem to have assumed human postures and personalities.

Le Thon (1968) is one of MacIver's most evocative works. She captures the moment when a sizable fish, rendered in stippled gray as flat and delicate as a paper kite, its fins spread like wings, lies helplessly on a store counter staring at oblivion. Somehow she manages, with feathered brushstrokes and a benign luminosity, to convey through this individual tuna the fate of Everyfish.

One of the few later canvases in the exhibition, *New York Sunset* (1980) is the work of a painter at ease with her world. The skyline of MacIver's hometown is ablaze with the colors of a sunset, set against transparent layers of old brownstones and massive skyscrapers. A single tree branch is suspended above the city, an appropriate symbol for an artist who has brought a poet's insight and perspicacity to everything she has chosen to paint. □

Author: *Robert G. Edelman is an artist who writes about art.*