April 1989

Artforum International

REVIEWS NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK NEW YORK

George McNeil, Midtown, 1987, oil on canvas. 78 × 64"

Irving Petlin, Song for Sarah....The Tree, 1985, pastel on paper. 30 × 22"

westward look, is full of hidden despair and funny little broken people. Light flickers intermittently on the grim scene, a mosaic of parts that adds up to an indeterminate whole. The key again is the central dominating black, which spreads like a fungus and plague, a mood from which no recovery seems possible. But the Berlin of these pictures still seems destroyed in spirit, in an emotional posture of self-destruction. Seeing a Berlin in which raw emotions are expressed in a self-mockingly primitive and sophisticated way is typical—that is the mythical Weimar Berlin—but it is strange to see pictures in which the famous Berlin sarcasm has become quite so black and institutionalized. In the past the Berlin sense of the perversity of life was tied to specific situations. It is no longer clear from Middendorf's marvelous pictures what those situations are—what leads him to respond with such vehement blackness. The blackness of the outsider may be the only emotional grandeur left to those whose lives are unlikely ever to be as grim as their forebears". —*DK*

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GEORGE McNEIL

M. KNOEDLER & COMPANY

George McNeil belongs to the brilliant generation of American artists born in the first decade of this century—a generation that includes Willem de Kooning, Alfred Jensen, Alice Neel, Fairfield Porter, and Myron Stout. This group had to survive devastating hardships such as two world wars and a depression before coming into its own in the late '40s and early '50s. Perhaps because of such obstacles, it is a generation that took its time developing. McNeil is no exception. He attended lectures at the Art Students League in the '20s, studied with Hans Hoffman in the early '30s, participated in the WPA project in the middle '30s, helped form the American Abstract Artists group in the late'30s, served in the Navy in World War II, began teaching in the late '40s, and began showing publicly in 1950. During the '50s, inspired by Jackson Pollock, he began working with canvases placed on the floor. By the late '50s, the figure began emerging in his improvisational, expressionist paintings. When his generation began to be dismissed by a younger group of formalist critics and artists, McNeil had hit his stride as a painter. His subject matter consisted of elements from the city (especially its more outrageous and theatrical inhabitants) and the artists's own imagination. He has held true to his vision since that time.

Although McNeil still works on the floor, the scale of his paintings conforms roughly to the limits of his reach. Except for the rather expansive *Forty-Seventh Street*, 1988, most of the works shown here measure between six and eight feet square. Typically, the paintings consist of one or more figures, as well as fields of delineated activity interrupted by areas of nearly solid color. He wants paintings to come at the viewer like a bus full of screaming children. In *Midtown*, 1987, he depicts a head atop a geometrically unfolding, abstract band, which terminates in feet. He includes a cluster of buildings along the upper left edge, a car along the upper right edge, and tiny floating figures throughout. Everything seems to exist somewhere between flatness and a weightless realm. The piece is rough, exuberant, and childlike, full of humorous incidents, caricature, and a kind of rough-and-tumble painterliness. McNeil has absorbed a great deal into his approach. One can see bits of Jean Dubuffet's *art brut*, Hans Hoffman's notion of push-pull, German Expressionist color (particularly the palette of an artist like Emil Nolde), and the uninhibited fantasy world of children's drawings. Yet it is clear that McNeil has brewed this unlikely concoction in his own way. In their celebration of urban life, his paintings are simultaneously brassy and vulnerable, mischievous and knowing. —*John Yau*

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IRVING PETLIN

KENT FINE ARTS

This small retrospective survey focused on Irving Petlin's work in the relatively neglected medium of pastel. Besides Lucas Samaras and, more recently, Jane Dickson, Petlin is one of the few contemporary artists to have made pastels an essential part of his ongoing project. Clearly, he believes drawing is still a viable practice, and he makes no concessions to the host of unspoken proscriptions regarding drawing, painting, the use of metaphor, and relevant subject matter. In nearly all of his pastels, Petlin depicts one or more figures in a landscape. But the figure is more a motif than a subject. Among other things, the drawings are philosophical speculations on the relationship of the individual with both the world and Jewish culture. By choosing to focus on biography and culture, Petlin deliberately challenges all the paradigms developed by formalist critics and artists. Moreover, by making his Jewishness a central aspect of his subject matter, he contextualizes formalism's authoritarian agenda within a political framework, rather than a utopian and esthetic one. Instead of addressing art history, he can be said to ask, What is the world we inhabit and how do we live in it?

For the most part, Petlin's imaginative figures dwell in an arid world of dust and light. The artist clearly prefers yellow, orange, and tan to red, blue, and green, using the pastel as a self-reflexive tool. Mined from the earth, its colored dust becomes irrefutable evidence of a desiccated landscape, which exists as much in the mind as on paper. The dust makes it both actual and metaphorical.

The exhibition traces Petlin's development and documents his major preoccupations. During the '70s, for example, he was concerned with the evocative image of a dry lake bed. In his "Echo Lake" series, 1974–75, the pastel dust becomes a comment on, an echo of, both the quality of the lake and culture's constant effort to renew itself. The theme of circularity forms one of the underpinnings of Petlin's project. In 1981, Petlin did a pastel that signaled a new phase of his career. In *Scenes From a Balcony, Santa Cruz*, 1981, he depicted a figure sitting on a balcony, gazing at an expansive landscape. The image of a figure looking on or looking back underscores his preoccupation with being a witness. Throughout the '80s, both in his paintings and his pastels, Petlin recontextualized and reinvestigated this basic scene. In the "*Weisswald*" (White forest) series, 1987, Petlin depicted a figure watching (dreaming of, or remembering?) a team of white horses pull a wagon down the street of a burning city. The city is a conflation of Warsaw and Chicago, the figure both a stand-in and a distancing device for the artist. Art, both as practice and as completed act, is for Petlin an attempt to bear witness. He constantly questions how we look at, remember, and use history. —*JY*

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FREDERICK KIESLER

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART; JASON McCOY

The small selection of drawings at Jason McCoy and the large retrospective at the Whitney helped substantiate Frederick Kiesler's uncategorical philosophy of de-

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