

# the art of elias friedensohn

articles & reviews

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**E**lias Friedensohn endows his large compositions with the narrative weight and symbolic complexity of Renaissance art. Sustained by his sober craftsmanship, they partake of a classical aura, yet the paintings and sculptures representative of his past thirty years in "Elias Friedensohn: An Overview" are anything but stuffy or academic. Independent of both current fashion and any stultifying idealization of the past, Friedensohn emerges from this condensed retrospective an artist of originality and of relevance to contemporary concerns with image-making.

The source of Friedensohn's freshness lies in his self-conscious concern for the relations of painter, image, and audience. His resolute, almost fastidious craftsmanship, which establishes a distance between artist and viewer, generates allusion and irony; his illusory images engage in a dialogue of absence and presence, questioning the possibility of communication and the relation of intimacy to eros and violence. Friedensohn's contemporary affinities include Surrealism and modern European literature, but moderated by a consistent social concern and by a lively sense of painting's theatrical aspects.

In the early, painterly canvases, the heavily worked surfaces are more a matter of craft than of gestural expression. Heads and figures emerge from the undifferentiated, luminous grounds, dissolved alternately by light and shadow. Linked to this play with the image is the recurrent theme of the Secret, of the absurdity of our efforts to communicate, of the impossibility of intimacy or self-revelation. Friedensohn's figures are impeded by deafness or muteness, by physical barriers (*Pyramus and Thisbe*); their exchanges are boring or empty (figures counting on their fingers), and may culminate in violent efforts to penetrate one another's bodies. These themes reemerge in recent depictions of lovers whose entrails are exposed. At their first showing, in the 1950s, these paintings challenged the then-dominant ethos of Abstract Expressionism, which sought for an inter-subjectivity of artist and viewer at some inarticulate but profound level.

The social and political dimensions of these concerns are sug-

gested by the series of "Witnesses," whose frontal, unadorned torsos recall Giacometti's sculptures, yet whose title endows them with a symbolic weight foreign to his more subjectively based art. The Witnesses point the way to Friedensohn's huge gallery installation of 1967 based on the assassination of William McKinley. Impossible, unfortunately, to recreate for this exhibition, the piece included a Kafkaesque portrayal of the trial in which the viewer could participate and even an "assassination machine" in which he could play-act the role of the assassin himself.

These efforts involved Friedensohn with theater and called upon his new-found interest in sculpture. Influenced by Pop Art, they utilized vernacular imagery and contemporary subject matter, yet with an underlying social commitment and a sophistication more akin to European drama and fiction; they were informed as well by Friedensohn's awareness of art history, which he studied for two years after completing his art training.

In the late '60s, the artist brought all these concerns to bear on a series of paintings which test the limits of irony. Recreating the visual world of Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*, Friedensohn mobilized the full pictorial resources of Renaissance and Mannerist art, as though to exploit to the utmost his imagery's capacity for seductive illusion. Yet the figures, drawn with a literalness which accentuates anatomical and sculptural detail, are deliberately awkward and unstable, as though pumped full of air. The palette is enriched by a full range of colors, but these lapse into acidic greens and sickly-sweet lavenders, as the earlier contrasts of light and shade are replaced by an overall, high-keyed gray. Finally, Bellini's vision of the fullness of life succumbs to an imagery of violence and sexual sadism. As comments on the facile utopianism of the '60s, these works attempt to capture and objectify a state of mind, to seduce and repel. They remain Friedensohn's most problematic works, marked by a sense of strain, not so much of the painter at odds with his age as of the painter almost at odds with painting itself.

This tension within the image gives way to a more playful

irony in the subsequent paintings, which return to the theme of love. Here romantic transports of ecstasy are literally portrayed in soaring figures, but not without overtones of violence and wry allusions to the waking world, which emphasize the lovers' precarious state. The nudes in these works maintain the somewhat awkward anatomical articulation of the previous paintings, and one wonders if, in his efforts to satirize the classical nude, Friedensohn didn't touch on some personal sense of form. Looking back, we find sculptural mass always treated with ambiguity in his work: the early figures tend to dissolve in light, and even his actual sculptures tend to balloon upwards. This lightness of fantasy finds its fullest expression in the weightless, eroticized couples of the Lovers series.

In the urban landscapes which provide the lovers' ironic counterweight, Friedensohn displays a new, inventive playfulness. Landscape, in fact, develops steadily in richness and scale throughout his work, from the early, contextless figures into the open vistas of mountains and sea which characterize the Cretan paintings of the late '70s. In these paintings, and in the series based on travels in Tunisia and Israel, irony and problems of

communication are subsumed in a documentary vision which orders the contrast of cultures—the clash of old with new. The rich chiaroscuro of the early figures returns, but with a vastly enlarged context and rather mysterious fragments of figures emerge from the shadows of marketplace, even as shadows themselves assume a disquiet substantiality. Yet the overall treatment is sober and classical with a return to earthy greens and browns—at times a bit of but often revealing a powerful interplay of pure forms, as in stark Cubist collage.

In his newest paintings, Friedensohn seems to react again to this density of allusion. It matches the severity of his color and drawing with the elimination of all context, and returns to his early theme of secrets, focusing on an isolated pair—nudes, one of whom whispers to the other. The risk in these works is banality, yet in the best of them he rises above his self-imposed limitations. His superb workmanship, the dialogue of related forms, and the interplay of light and shade combine with the complex theme of a message seen but not heard to convince us that Friedensohn has tapped new powers in the art of figuration. (Terry Dintenfass, *February 2-28*)

Hearne Pard

## ELIAS FRIEDENSOHN

Elias Friedensohn, *Flea Market in Nah*  
1982. Wash heightened with white, 20% x 23 1/4". Courtesy Terry Dintenfass Gall.

