

the art of

elias friedensohn

articles & reviews

Elias Friedensohn

1924–1991

by Blair T. Birmelin

Elias Friedensohn died in August of 1991, but the large body of work he left behind testifies to both his brilliance and his questing, contentious spirit. His art was figurative in an age of abstraction and literary when formalism held sway. Still, as unique and out of step with the times as he sometimes felt himself to be, his work nonetheless reflects influences and concerns, both artistic and social, that also touched his contemporaries.

Friedensohn was aware of the past, of history—how could he not have been? But if he wanted to challenge it, he also wanted to belong to it, not only as it might be represented by emigre talent in New York, but as he had seen and felt it in (wartime) Europe: a civilization brought low but still vital, a culture he had risked his life to save. Art would connect him—an American—with a living tradition. And as a Jew he asked for something else of art—that it provide him with the means to confront the Holocaust, the

unspeakable, the end of history. And to these nearly contradictory demands of his calling, he added another—that his art somehow be responsive to the complexities and the vagaries of the individual psyche in its process or relating to others. Underlying these aims was Friedensohn's notion of art as a rigorous craft, in the way it had been in medieval times or in the renaissance, and of the artist as an able, self-respecting craftsman.

If Friedensohn shifts from one style to another, even from one discipline to another, we understand that his search was not for a solution as the word was currently applied to the problem-solving process of abstraction; rather his search was for a vehicle that might contain the thoughts that he might have put into words, that he often did put into words. He badly wanted ways to pose questions, and not necessarily questions about art, or not about art solely. ■