

the art of elias friedensohn

articles & reviews

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Art: Viewing 'Young America'

By EMILY GENAUER

Observers of the American art scene who have been consoling themselves during the past half-dozen years with the thought that "This too shall pass away," can now relax. The tidal wave of improvisational abstraction of pictures thoughtlessly and formlessly dripped, tossed, dragged into being, is receding at last. Those of us who keep the watch have been reporting the signs of change for some time now. This week what might be called official verification came at, of all places, the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has in the past been hospitable to some of the most absurd and empty examples of the new "school."



Emily Genauer

This is not for a minute to suggest that in the museum's new exhibition, called "Young America" and consisting of work by thirty artists under thirty-five years of age, abstractions have been replaced by conventional representational paintings. To the visitor not familiar with art developments within the past decade the pictures and sculpture in the show may still look wild indeed. In fact, eighteen of the thirty artists participating must be described as abstract, semi-abstract,

or abstract surrealist, although this is a considerably smaller percentage than would have applied in Whitney Museum round-ups of the recent past.

Much more significant is the fact that the character of even the abstractions has changed immensely. With a few noisy exceptions they are carefully wrought, thoughtful pictures commenting poetically, imaginatively, emotionally and very subtly on the moods of nature, on human relationships, on man vis-a-vis his environment. Many of them avoid the easy seductions of vivid color and opulent texture, tending, instead, to the mystical, the brooding, the symbolic, instead of to the merely decorative.

Surprise

A great surprise is that as many as eleven of the thirty artists are frankly expressionist, using the human image, however sharply stylized, to communicate their strong and sometimes sardonic reactions to human weakness and to the state of the world. One of the artists works in the extremely meticulous, delicate, representational vein of "magic-realism."

But reading what the artists have to say about their present thinking is as startling and almost as interesting as seeing their works. One, Jonah Kingstein, speaks of Goya, Velazquez, El Greco, Rembrandt and Titian as his special admirations; another, Robert Andrew Parker, mentions Vermeer, Piero della Francesca,

Paolo Uccello and G. B. Tiepolo (wasn't it only yesterday that young artists talked as if painting began around 1910 with Kandinsky?). Biblical and mythological themes provide Elias Friedensohn with material from which he attempts to evolve "a valid figurative symbolism based on emotional and psychological truths which will speak directly." Gerald McLaughlin says that he used to be abstract (many of the young artists report that they started with non-objective and abstract painting of the sort where "activating the canvas," as one celebrated teacher of the method calls it, is the sole aim), but now he feels that that style has too often become "manipulation of language for its own sake. My hope, as of this moment, is to find subjects that seem worth talking about, and then use that language of painting as a vehicle for these subjects."

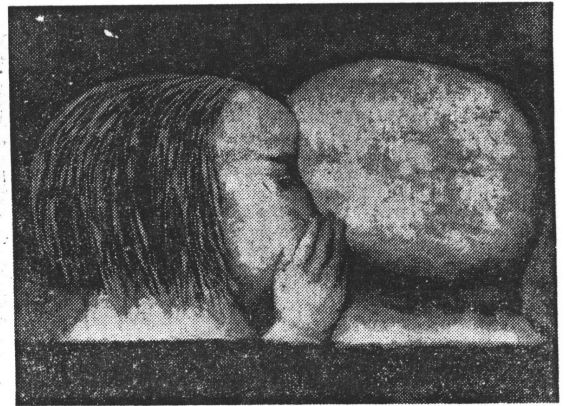
Whatever Happened?

Question: What's got into our young artists?

Answer: It's what's got out of them that's more important.

At the beginning, intoxicated by the heady brew of color and shape, and also by the enormous success of certain highly publicized exponents of the accidental, improvisational, paint-is-all approach, they worked in a similar manner—and themselves received far more critical and museum acclaim than they deserved.

In due time, however, the intoxication wore off. Many of the



"Secret," oil by Elias Friedensohn in the new Whitney Museum show, "Young America."

more serious went to Europe to study on fellowships, scholarships or on their own (twelve of the Whitney's thirty artists have worked abroad), and, after living with a lot of old masters as well as with certain contemporary European artists steeped in tradition, many of them dropped their old preconceptions. They became aware of how they had been short-changing themselves, of what narrow sights they had set, of the nobility and grandeur that had been achieved in the past with the same materials they were using to make more or less attractive wall decorations.

And now, at last, employing the technical freedoms and daring they learned in their earlier phase, working still, as they should and must, in the forms of our own

time, many of them have also begun to observe, think and feel as well as paint, draw and carve. They're not all good yet, of course. But there are many really fine original and sensitive items in the show, by artists like Boynton, Eshoo, Frazier, Friedensohn (what an extraordinary thing is his "Effort at Speech between Two People," in which two lacerated heads seem to merge in a tangle of nerve ends and shredded flesh!), Kingstein, McLaughlin, Jan Muller, Phillips, Plate, Aubrey Schwartz, Stankiewicz, Treiman, Weinberg and Zajac. Working in abstract, surrealist and expressionist styles, they present so solid a front of professionalism that the problem presented by amateurs numerically dominating the art world will soon take care of itself.