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ART

Airports: World of Alienation

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

ELIAS FRIEDENSOHN died of cancer on Aug. 26, shortly before the opening of his show of recent paintings, "Airports: Power and Patience," at A. J. Lederman's gallery here. On the strength of the painterly evidence, he did not go gently. Ms. Lederman describes Friedensohn as "an old-time lefty" who was disappointed that the fruits of industrial society did not elevate mankind's existence.

To judge from the 14 paintings on view, human life today is banal, if not zombie-like. But Friedensohn was a very accomplished painter who conveyed his unpalatable message in a variety of styles.

In some paintings he seems to have learned much from abstraction about the power of pure simple forms; in others he emphasizes a kind of crassness inherent in life. He gives some of his figures the dumb, even walled expressions and the kind of detail associated with medieval depictions of peasants.

Friedensohn wrote about his work, and this is sometimes a hazard because if a painter turns his work into a written narrative, there is no need to experience the work itself, for we have been told everything. But a few fertile notions can be lifted from his writing.

For example, he declares that airport lounges "are the same as waiting rooms were" and a waiting room

Strangers occupy waiting rooms, remaining remote.

has overtones of a hospital. A more extended idea is that "'aloft' is a mystical form of waiting — a mindless meditation about the world — closer to where God was supposed to be and closer to what God was supposed to be like."

The last word in his narrative is "apocalypse," and this gigantic concept is fitted over modest-size paintings of airport terminals. "Connecting Flight" easily summons up Edward Hopper, and if Hopper is invoked too easily these days whenever people are depicted in situations of isolation, the comparison is resonant here. Friedensohn includes the front of a jumbo-size plane and it resembles a white cloud, a way for the artist to introduce his cosmic ideas.

It is impossible to show a delayed flight, so the painting with that title is a few figures in blinding white surroundings. This is Friedensohn's most abstract work, with the possible exception of "Refueling," in which the focus is on several rows of empty seats. But "Delayed Flight" signals

that light in all its manifestations is a major interest of the artist.

"Heathrow II" and a few other paintings feature fluorescent tubes, and these light fixtures, although they might make one think of U.F.O.'s, become like schools of fish and the waiting room like a giant aquarium. The plane one sees becomes a whale. The chaotic lights are a metaphor for the anxiety that lurks in all waiting rooms.

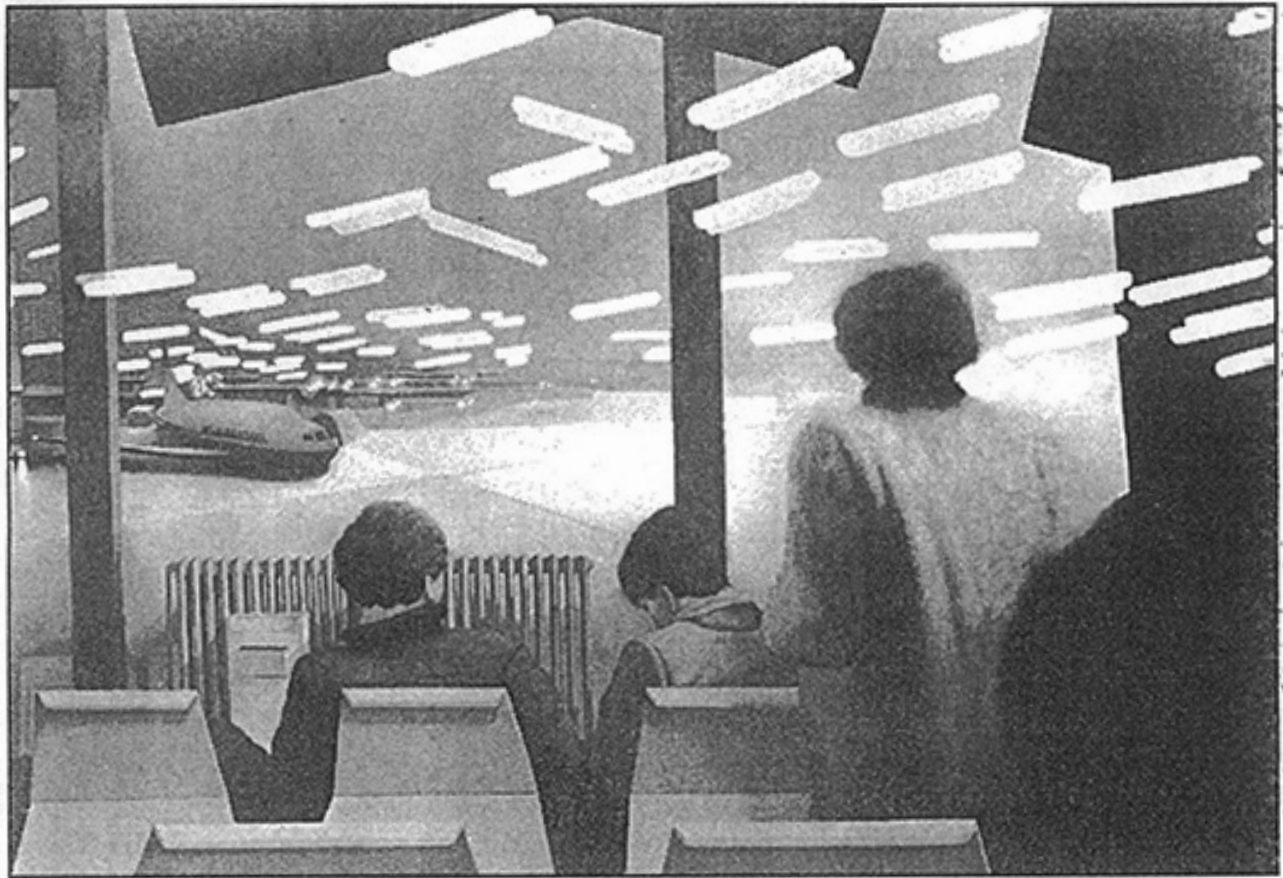
Other paintings make the viewer realize that complex and marvelous machinery operates in its own sphere, oblivious of human concerns, but the airport paintings reach a crescendo in "Terrorist at Heathrow." The figure crouching behind a seat so that only the top of his head is visible, but pointing a real-looking gun, is surely a little boy (or is he?).

At any rate, the others in the waiting room are blasé in the extreme, and this viewer's attention was attracted more by the presence of an old-fashioned radiator in the sleek surroundings — and a commanding standing figure looking as if he is about to exit the scene. This is a portrait of Friedensohn himself, and he is drawn as if to emphasize that he and Abraham Lincoln have the same beard.

Friedensohn, who taught much of his life mostly at Queens College in New York City, lived in Leonia. That fact figures prominently in the painting "Phoenix Flight 360." Above the main action is a depiction of a moving electric sign giving information about a flight between Phoenix and Leonia.

the art of
elias friedensohn

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"Heathrow II," oil on canvas by Elias Friedensohn, on exhibition in Hoboken.

Of course, there is no such flight, but it reveals how closely the artist identifies with his subject matter. The figures in this painting are glowing and insubstantial like those in the film "Close Encounters of the Third Kind."

"Late Flight From Newark," also painted this year, is two pink figures, a nude male and a nude female, weightless and embracing in the air. Roses accompany them. This vision is imposed upon a gray scene of ordi-

nariness, the expressway to Newark International Airport. Given Friedensohn's deeply felt quarrel with contemporary life, one is tempted to see this as a declaration of reconciliation.

But to say that he gave in to sweetness, one must deal with the portraits that are in the show as a kind of coda to the airport paintings. They grind in his sense of pervasive alienation. In many of the depicted waiting rooms are people commonly called "skin-heads"; Friedensohn painted some of

these close up. The subjects make obscene gestures, and women bare their breasts. One woman does it coyly, but another seems oblivious, as if her body has no connection to her. In any case, these are people who pose before the world posing doubly, for Friedensohn.

The show runs through Nov. 8. A. J. Lederman Fine Art is at 309 Court Street. Hours are noon to 7 P.M. Thursday and Friday and noon to 4 P.M. Saturday and Sunday.