

the art of

elias friedensohn

articles & reviews



Elias Friedensohn

AN OVERVIEW: 1958-1984

February 2-28, 1985

Terry Dintenfass Gallery

50 West 57 Street • New York, NY 10019 • 212/581-2268

the art of elias friedensohn

"Voyages are the acquisition of successive disguises. . . They are inward and outward, backward and forward; they move from there to here, from now to then, from yesterday to again."

ELIAS FRIEDENSOHN

To be sure, in Friedensohn's voyage as a painter, the locale shifts often — from interior worlds of anguish, fear and dreams to familiar cityscapes, and from invented American courtrooms to exotic Mediterranean markets and souks. The time spans centuries and civilizations. The tone ranges from compassionate and coolly ironic to grimly satiric and vitriolic. However, beneath these "disguises," the hallmarks of his work, spanning more than three decades, are clearly discernable: figuration, narration, and a passionate engagement with humanism.

Friedensohn graduated from New York's High School of Music and Art and attended the Tyler School of Fine Arts in Philadelphia for one year. After serving in Germany during World War II, and a year's sojourn in Paris, he completed his B.A. at Queens College

and studied Art History for two years at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. Since the late 1950's Friedensohn has been a faculty member of the Art Department of Queens College of The City University of New York.

The first mature works (1953-55) were greeted enthusiastically by critics. Emily Genauer of the *New York Times*, in reviewing the 1957 Whitney show entitled "Young America," certainly had Friedensohn in mind when she spoke of a new breed of young artists leading the way back to figurative art. "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." Although German Expressionism lurks in the background of the mid-'50's work, Friedensohn also drew upon the freedom of tech-



Effort at Speech Between Two People, 1957

Oil on canvas, 28" x 36"

Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Fischer

nique and style offered by the then prominent Abstract Expressionists. The subdued tonalities of this period, with their subtle evocation of mystery, scarcely hint at the virtuosity of color range of later years. At the core of *Efforts at Speech* (1957) is the theme of human communication *in extremis*. The painting reveals what Friedensohn calls "pierced facades" — glimpses of

the art of elias friedensohn

the life force buried deep within the psyche.

A concurrent thrust of the late '50's was subject matter based on mythology and biblical history. In *Expulsion From the Garden* (1958) — and in other works of the same period such as *Lazarus*, *Icarus*, *Daedalus* and *Prometheus* — Friedensohn embraces a more classicizing and, hence, sculptural style. A reviewer for *Arts Magazine* (April 1959) was quick to note this direction:

"The paintings seem to point to a three-dimensional art; perhaps it is the plastically-directed outward motion of the figures and the use of the substance of paint as plane pertaining only to them that suggest a need to be liberated in sculpture. The figures made out of palette-knifed slabs of whitened brown, the oil paint itself driving forward with the force of the idea, is typical of Friedensohn's present interest."

This important body of work, evoking Old Masters and Renaissance traditions, was painted during the artist's Fulbright grant to Italy in 1958-59. Frank Getlein of *The New*



Expulsion From The Garden, 1958, Oil on canvas, 52" x 78 1/4"

National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of the Sara Roby Foundation

the art of
elias friedensohn



Pyramis and Thisbe, 1962
Wood and epoxy, polychromed
26½" H. x 15¾" W.

Republic (June 8, 1959) commented on what has become a signature of Friedensohn's work, translations of classical themes into contemporary statements:

"...what appears (in *Expulsion*) is not only Adam and Eve but Massaccio's Adam and Eve in the Brancacci Chapel translated from fresco line to paint construction. The picture is one of those rare translations of any art that preserve the essence of the original and at the same time create a whole new and authentic work of art."

In the early 1960's, spurred on by contemporary Op and Pop innovations and by the Theatre of the Absurd, the artist shifted gears. Returning to the theme of communication, he produced a series of Pop sculptural pieces similar to *Pyramis and Thisbe*, 1962. Here is a 20th century "dial version of Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night's Dream* lovers, who can communicate only through a hole in the wall. In the painted epoxy sculpture, Thisbe appears only as an ear modeled inside the back door of the pay phone." (*Time Magazine*, Dec. 11, 1964) These playful figures in clean

primary colors speak to the ludicrous and the comic in the eternal struggle against isolation.

From communication as comedy, Friedensohn turned next to history as tragedy. The Assassination of President McKinley was the subject of his next major exhibition, held at Dintenfass in 1967. While vacationing in Maine in the summer of 1962, he happened upon a contemporary account of McKinley's murder and the trial of the self-styled anarchist, Leon Czolgosz. Intrigued, Friedensohn set to work on a multi-media theater-piece; a large scale re-enactment of the trial. (*frontispiece*) The project was soon halted, however, when the shooting of John F. Kennedy brought the issues too close to home. *The Trial of Czolgosz*, finally exhibited in 1967, featured an assassination/slot machine in which the viewer/"villain" could deposit a quarter and feel the instant "thrill" of pulling the trigger. In the exhibit, portraits of jurors, jailors and judges are flattened, twisted, declassified. The artist's cultural critique encompasses victims and villains alike; all mirror the frightening face of an unmoored, violent society.

the art of elias friedensohn

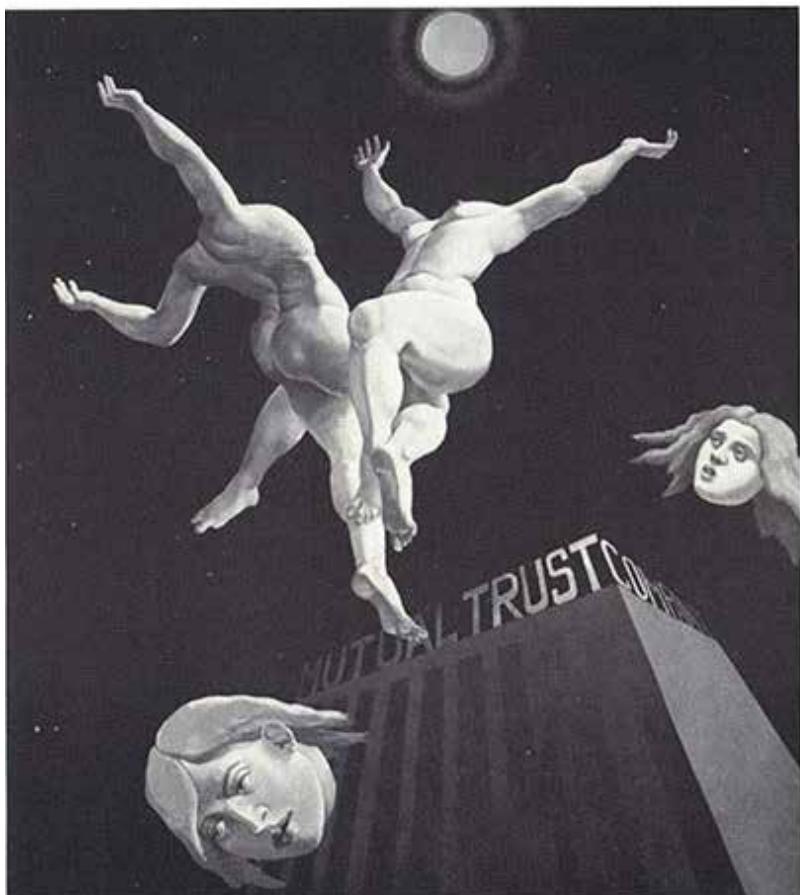
Following *The Trial of Czolgosz*, Friedensohn moved into what he calls his "poison" period. In a series of shocking, acidly beautiful paintings executed between 1969-72, he continued his attack on the hypocrisy, corruption and ideological hubris of the modern era. *A Little Child Shall Lead Them* (1970) depicts a procession of nude figures engaging in some debased Bacchic ritual. Decadence, dismemberment and death permeate the canvas. The viewer is assaulted by the jarring juxtaposition of treachy blues and pinks dissolving into lavender and lime green. In a *New York Times* review of November 7, 1970, John Canaday called the series "nasty" and suggested that "the premises be fumigated after the show closed." Canaday's piece sparked a rash of letters in support of Friedensohn's work, but the critic would not be deflected. He retorted, "the subject matter of a work of art may be vile and disgusting but the work of art itself need not be (witness Goya)." (*New York Times*, November 14, 1970)

With *Mutual Trust Company* (1972) Friedensohn put the "poisonous" apocolypse theme behind him



A Little Child Shall Lead Them, 1969
Oil on canvas, 80" x 90"

the art of
elias friedensohn



Mutual Trust Company, 1972
Oil on canvas, 80" x 70"

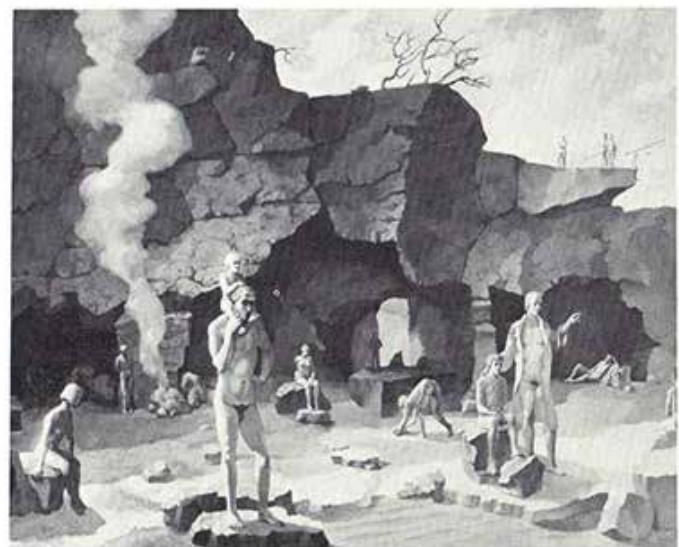
and launched a "Quest for Love" series. Here and in *Ecstasy Over Brooklyn* (1973), hovering nudes, merging and separating, suggest physical rapture, spiritual bliss and the terrible fragility of human bonds.

What Your Honda Can Do For You Is No Dream (1973, back cover) grew out of a casual observation. While traveling in New Hampshire one summer, the artist saw an adolescent boy mount a stationary motorbike, tune out earthbound reality and embrace wild dreams of love and power. The teenager's fantasy was Friedensohn's invitation to satire. In the painting, the protagonist's dream-queen cleaves passionately to him, yet her falling slipper foretells their fate.

An exhibition entitled "Visions of Crete" was held at Dintenfass in 1975. Time past and time present fuse on the Cretan beaches where international hippies create their own private world. Friedensohn's deliberate figural distortions and clear, non-atmospheric settings in which light pours over every element, recall the work of Giovanni Bellini. In both *Hippie Utopia at Paleochora* (1975) and *The Tower* of the same year, the subjects' timeless

the art of elias friedensohn

Hippie Utopia at Paleochora, 1975
Oil on canvas, 60" x 74"



gestures and otherworldly stares, combined with a Poussinesque palette of light blues and beiges, hint at the impossible dream of these post-modern, transitory cave dwellers.

Friedensohn's real-life voyages — to Crete in 1973 and to North Africa and the Middle East a few years later — always end artistically in the realm of the artist's imagination:

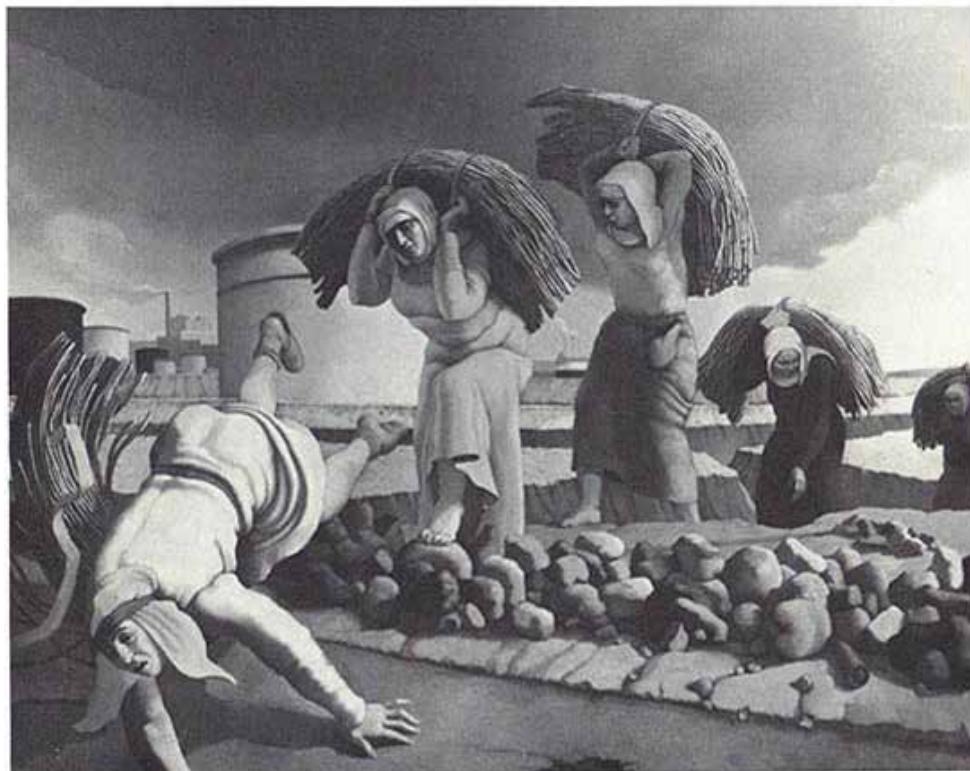
"The voyager is a mute, an unknown; he is a stranger, suffering from non-belonging... he is burdened by the memory of other journeys and the knowledge of an uncertain destiny... he confronts oppositions: dream and reality, past to present... public and private... substance and void... permanence and change... In each he speaks with the forked tongue of

irony and compassion."

(Elias Friedensohn July 1982)

All of these contrasts exist in *Tunisian Pastorale* (1980). The painting is Renaissance in style and Beaux Arts in coloration; it is biblical in feeling, anachronistic in subject matter (women carrying faggots for fuel while modern oil drums loom in the distance), and contemporary in vision. The plight of

the art of
elias friedensohn



Tunisian Pastorale II, 1980
Oil on canvas, 48" x 60"

these Tunisian women, beasts of burden treading an habitual path of never-ending labor, is underlined by the subtitle, *The Blind Leading the Blind*.

In recent paintings, Friedensohn continues to "filter" his travel experiences through highly personal lenses. Marketplaces, streets, souks and the surrounding landscape of Tunisia and Israel are the subjects of this body of work in oil and watercolor. Eschewing identification of national characteristics, he focuses attention on qualities of light, atmosphere and mood inherent in each scene. According to the artist, the opening hours of the flea market offer all the "forming and visionary" aspects of light while the closing hours remind him of a mysterious force "chewing away at the identity of forms. Darkness defeats identity; it swallows up, absorbs, pulls things back into the final obscure disorder." Faces and forms sometimes sharpen into focus, sometimes dissolve in the enveloping mist. *Jerusalem*

the art of
elias friedensohn

Shadows (1984) embodies this incessant ebb and flow; here shadows reverse the natural order of things and become living presences. Substance is dematerialized, dominated.

The most recent work includes four pieces on the theme of "Secrets." (front cover) These continue a 20-year probing of the problem of communication, an artistic meditation which includes, among others, the first *Secret* of 1955, his *Effort at Speech Between Two People* and the Pop sculpture of the 1960's.

The newest "Secrets," with their frozen moments of intimacy, reiterate the artist's special brand of classicism. Restrained and undistorted, requiring neither historical nor exotic supports for their impact and intensity, these images offer perhaps the most inward-probing journey "from there to here, from now to then, from yesterday to again" yet undertaken by the voyager, Elias Friedensohn.

Laurene Buckley Banks
Director



Jerusalem Shadows, 1983
Oil on canvas, 60" x 72"