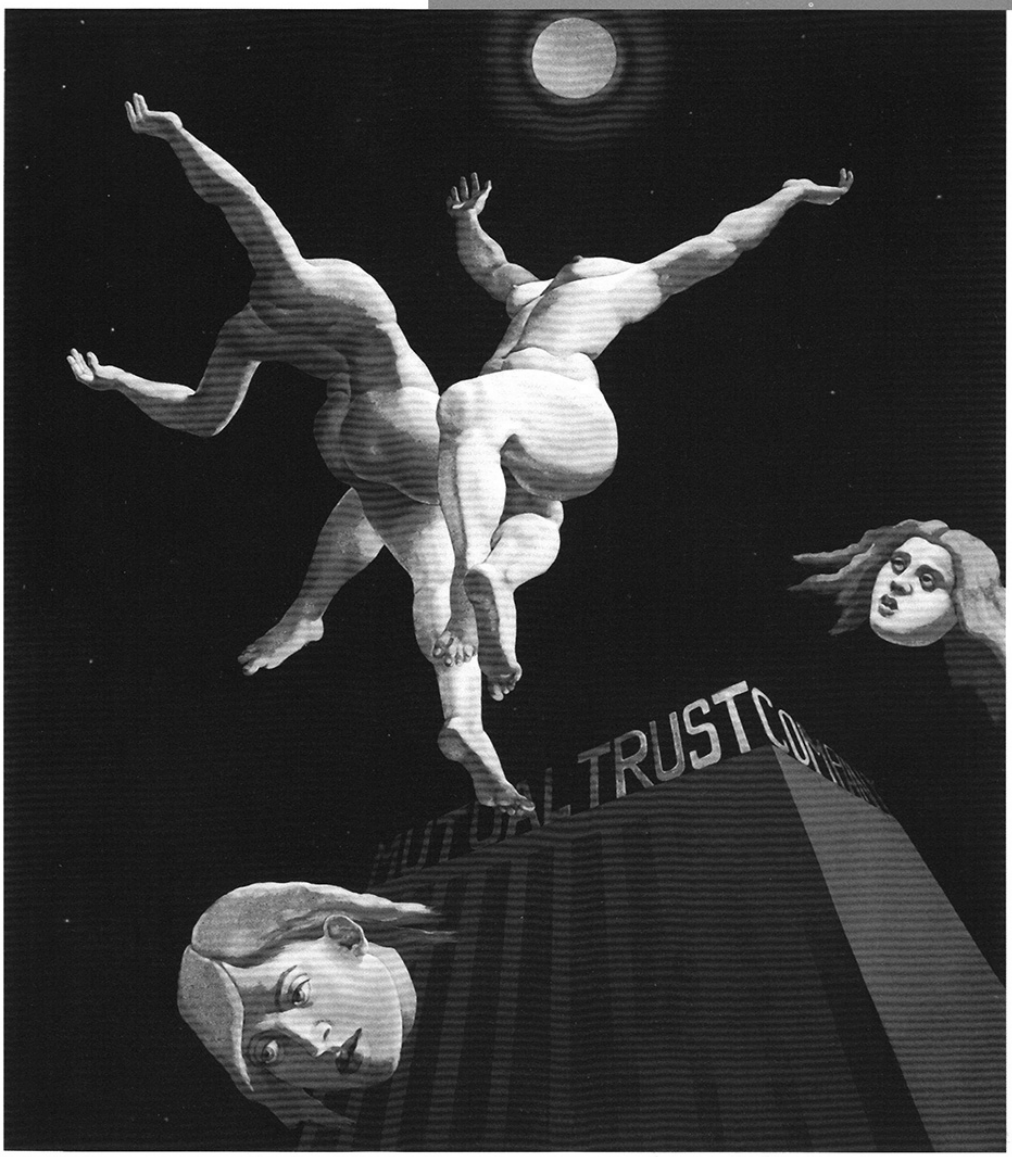
the art of

elias friedensohn

articles & reviews

Elias Friedensohn



The Persistence of Figuration: Elias Friedensohn

An Exhibition of
Paintings

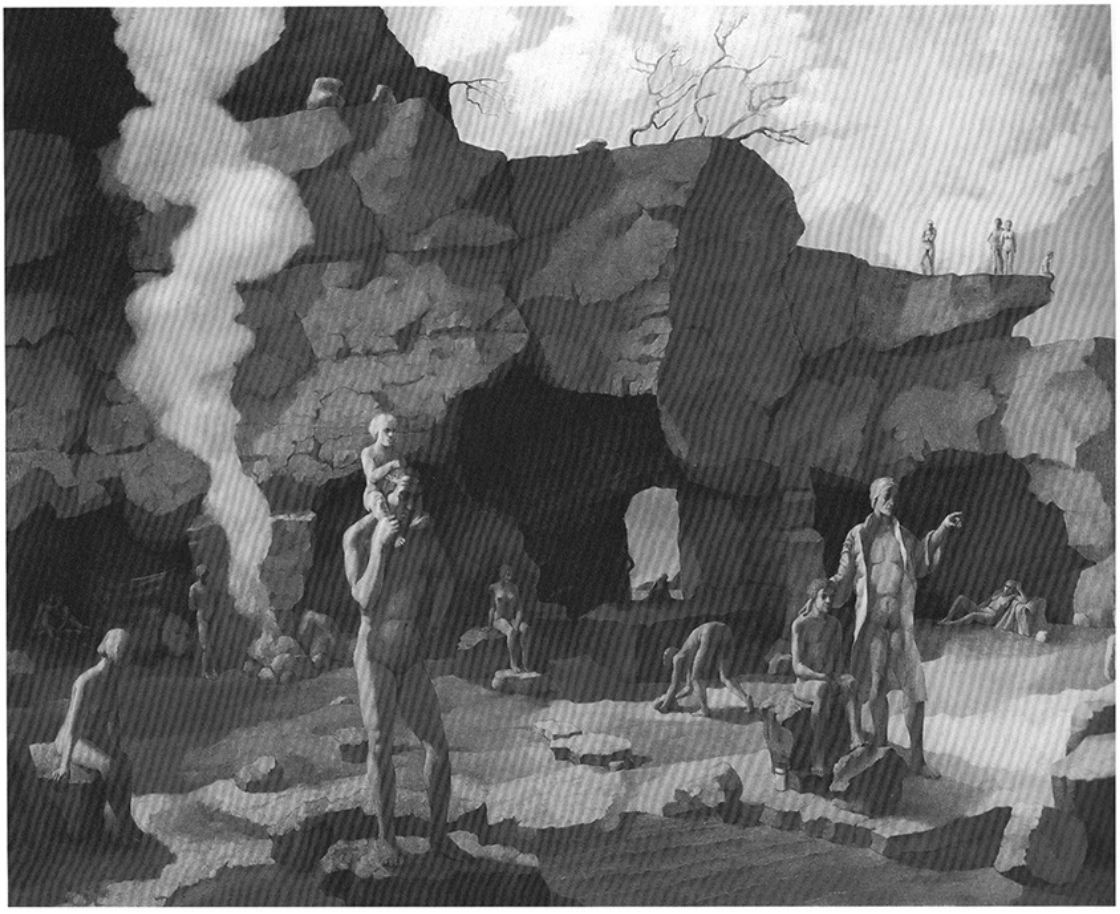
March 3 – 21, 1997

Curated by
Peter London

University of
Massachusetts Dartmouth
Art Gallery

North Dartmouth
Massachusetts

The Caves at Paleochoa,
oil on canvas,
60 x 74 inches.



On Figurative Painting

by Elias Friedensohn, 1990

From an unpublished manuscript by Elias Friedensohn, 1990.

My commitment to the figure as the most significant vehicle of artistic creation came from Michelangelo who was my earliest and most powerful mentor. Following Michelangelo and other great narrative painters, I turned to the Bible, Greek myths, and fairy tales for my thematic needs. Through the figure I sought a universality that would demand a minimum of location in place or time. These choices reflect classical and humanistic temper. However, I am also connected to Bosch, Francis Bacon, Gruenewald and Altdorfer: a romantic and surrealist cynic, fascinated by grotesque beauty. These are my opposing selves. The tension between the two drives my work, resulting often in perverse and contrary positions.

My first painting I thought of as my own was a self portrait inspired by a dream: in the dream I was a bald, hairless, heavy limbed, slow moving amalgam of infancy and old age: an oversized head on a body of shortened proportions – squat, ugly, almost cartoon-like. When I awoke, I went immediately to my studio and, with trepidations, painted that figure. It grew out of the context of surrealism and metaphysical poetry, the primitive arts, and artists like Moore, Marini and Baskin. However, at that moment, in 1954, I knew of no images in the contemporary art world which resembled my self portrait.

From that dream came an outpouring of paintings, idiosyncratic and obsessive, about the possibilities (or impossibilities) of communication between people. Secrecy was a sub theme. The force of a secret, like fear, distorts. In my paintings it produced oblate, swollen heads; and skin, like a containing wall, hardened into a brittle, plaster mask. The forms are jammed with invisible fury of the secret within.

When I began the Apocalypse paintings the sixties were coming to an end. Along with so many others, I was tormented by a sense of impending anarchy; and I was revolted by the glorification of doomsday dreams. The extremism of right and left took apocalyptic dimensions. Violence. Terrorism. Race riots. Sexual revolutions. Assassinations. The distrust of authority. All of the complacently held values of the past were shattered. Anxiety gave us no peace.

For the paintings, I chose images from the past that would provide a meditative distance: early Goya with the incipient madness of "innocent" children at play; the theatrical affectations of late Mannerists like Barocci; medieval altarpieces for the hard sell of faith; and turn-of-the-century advertising cards with their simpering falsity. Apocalypse is presented as Warhol-like inventions of the beautiful and the tempting. Meet the desexed, the androgynous, the dismembered, and those who fornicate to speed the millennium.

The humanist tradition no longer seemed adequate for depicting the evil of our times. Still, I began by depicting classical figures in grisaille, suggesting lingering death. Color, a token of life, appeared in the garments they wore, in facial make-up as if applied by a mortician, and in background props. I created a realm of artifice and burlesque where things were more real than our selves – an idea drawn from Pop Art and the Theater of the Absurd.

I am not interested in teaching, preaching or changing the world when I paint. However, I am impelled by a need to represent anarchy and destruction as conditions of being, as part of our human inheritance. Artists are obliged to make our loathsome monsters seductive; and viewers, secretly infatuated with the forms of horror, delight in gorgeous devils, outlaw deeds and depravity.

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Tunesian Pastorale #3,
oil on canvas,
60 x 80 inches.

by Peter London, March 1997.

What does one want from a teacher? Perhaps similar qualities one looks for in an artist. First integrity, then fierceness of spirit, a sweeping intelligence made approachable by kindness beyond our deserve. Articulateness, not wordiness. And, illusiveness, fascinating illusiveness. These would be what I seek in an artist and art teacher. These same qualities are what I had as a student of Elias Friedensohn.

When Eli burst on the scene at Queens College in the late 50s (he did burst on the scene), the art department was a quiet, predictable place. Fine arts here, art history there, crafts nowhere. A nice place. Eli soon fixed that. As one of the first acts as the faculty advisor to the art students association, he gathered together a few of us to speak to the question, "why I am an artist", before an audience of our peers and faculty. That damned question, it bothers me still. His dark energy and his prowling eyes got us all jumping. Ideas and enterprises started to arise, swirl around the place. Tough questions, difficult images, perplexing assignments, some awful and radiant responses. He made us hop.

I didn't mention bravery as an essential trait of an artist and art teacher, but Eli seemed very brave to us. I say seemed brave because he might not have felt that what he did and said were particularly brave, but merely natural and necessary. But to us he did seem brave, raising issues, proposing projects, doing things that no one else had dared before. His stepping forward cleared the way for us less certain students to test the power and range of our own voices.

Most of us came from working class families, who, if they were familiar with contemporary trends in art certainly knew no contemporary artists. So how were we to know how artists did what they did, how artists thought, saw things and thus lived? We knew how to make art, what we didn't know was how to construct a life that could sustain and be compatible with making art. Eli opened his mind to us, his heart, his home. He helped us imagine the features of a chosen life, an artist's life, so different than what our own parents could provide.

Eli Friedensohn helped us to see, to think, to dare and to sing. Now, without the help of their author, as is the case of artists of good measure, his work continues to delight and instruct.

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.

From the introduction to Secrets of Elias Friedensohn, Presses Universitaire de Nancy, France, 1993.

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 something else of art – that it provide him with the means to confront the Holocause, the unspeakable, the end of history. And to these nearly contradictory demands on 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 he had about the world-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.

Heathrow II,
oil on canvas,
32 x 46 inches.