

# the art of elias friedensohn

articles & reviews

The Record, 1989

## A pick of Jersey's best

By John Zeaman  
Record Art Critic

**W**hen it comes to New Jersey State Council on the Arts fellowship shows, small works best. Small shows, that is. For those not familiar with this kind of exhibit, it generally happens like this: Every year the state gives out grants to deserving artists. Then, some enterprising museum or institution decides to have a show of the winners' works.

The shows are meant to be a survey of the best art in New Jersey. Instead, they are about as satisfying as flipping channels on TV. The reason goes right to the heart of the problem with state financing for the arts: It's too democratic. The state government doesn't want to be in the position of endorsing any particular style of art. So, it tries to cover the shoreline. It tries to be balanced and fair.

Unfortunately, there's no substitute for connoisseurship. The history of art is one of winners and losers, and more often than not the status quo ends up on the garbage heap, and something on the sidelines — like impressionism or cubism — runs off with all the honors.

A new exhibit of fellowship winners at the Wyckoff Gallery avoids this problem. Using only a handful of this year's fellowship winners, the gallery has put together a small, compelling exhibit of mostly realist artists.

This is not to say that realism is the answer, or will emerge as the dominant style of the late 20th century when the history books are written. But, as far as exhibits go, it's much more satisfying to see a group of artists who relate, whose works subtly reinforce or interact with each other.

The best artists in this group deal with all the traditional problems of representation, while still making art that is unmistakably contemporary.

The most fascinating and complex of these artists is Elias Friedensohn. Friedensohn, who lives in Leonia, is also a writer on art, and his paintings reflect a deep knowledge of art history. His painting "Heathrow Airport" is a seemingly random view of an airport waiting room. It's dreary, like

all airports, and reminds us that if Edward Hopper were alive, he'd probably do an airport scene, too. The people sit in orange plastic chairs, and the blips of overhead fluorescent lights reflect in the glass walls, where beyond, a jetliner sits on the tarmac.

The people waiting are an anonymous assortment of travelers with different ethnic looks. There's even a punk with a Mohican haircut. The seeming casualness of the composition reminds us of Degas, yet the subject also seems pregnant with meaning: the airport as a metaphor for our new global village, and also as a popular venue for terrorism and hijackings.

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Above, "Heathrow Airport" by Elias Friedensohn; "Nemocolin Road," oil on paper, by Robert Andriulli, left.

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## BEST: Exhibit of realist painters

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But Friedensohn has more to offer. His painting is on a wood panel and the artist has painted an illusionistic frame around the border. Two of the figures in the painting rest their arms outside the frame, as if it were a windowsill. These kinds of devices — drawing attention to the illusion of the image — is the sort of thing that Renaissance painters like Mantegna once delighted in.

Robert Birmelin, also from Leonia, is represented here by a twilight landscape with a sports stadium. You can scan this scene forever for clues to its origin, but in fact, the image is a composite, a studio painting. It's a gritty industrial scene, a landscape of urban slums, low-slung warehouses, and a network of highways. Off to one side an illuminated sports stadi-

um brims over with light. The title, "cauldron-cityscape," makes us see the stadium almost as a still-life object. At the same time, the scene has the harshness of an unfiltered reality, of something too close to the truth to seem at first glance like art.

Unlike Birmelin and Friedensohn, St. Clair Sullivan is chiefly interested in anecdote. He doesn't worry so much over problems of perception, and he seems to revel in contemporary details. In the painting "Between Matisse & the Goldfish in the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden," a group of young people jostle each other at the edge of a reflecting pool. They wear down vests and running shoes and carry babies in metal-frame backpacks.

Of course, painting has tradi-

tionally been a medium for conveying details about clothing, hairstyles, fashion, and so forth. But in today's world of photography and advertising, this looks a bit like something from the L. L. Bean catalogue.

Several of the artists in this show are more traditional landscapists, and here, the contemporary world doesn't peek through so much. Robert Andriulli's "Nemocolin Road" is one of those rural landscapes with a patchwork quilt terrain. It could belong to any time. Painted with oil on paper, the subject allows the Paterson artist to indulge in loose, juicy brushwork. The color in this painting zings. It's the kind of painting that makes people want to go home and start painting.

In contrast, Gilbert Riou, also of Paterson, keeps the paint tightly controlled. He is a highly accomplished draftsman, but in paintings like "Saddle River Park II," he just can't let the paint have its way. Everything is so tightly controlled, with such tiny little brushes, that the whole thing might have been done with colored pencils.

"New Jersey Award Winners" can be seen 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday until Oct. 14. The gallery is at 210 Everett Ave., Wyckoff.