

the art of elias friedensohn

1924–1991

**This monthly
newsletter is
produced by the
Estate of Elias
Friedensohn.**

Among our goals are to showcase the originality and diversity of the artist's work and to circulate comments on the paintings and sculpture by critics, artists, friends and fans.

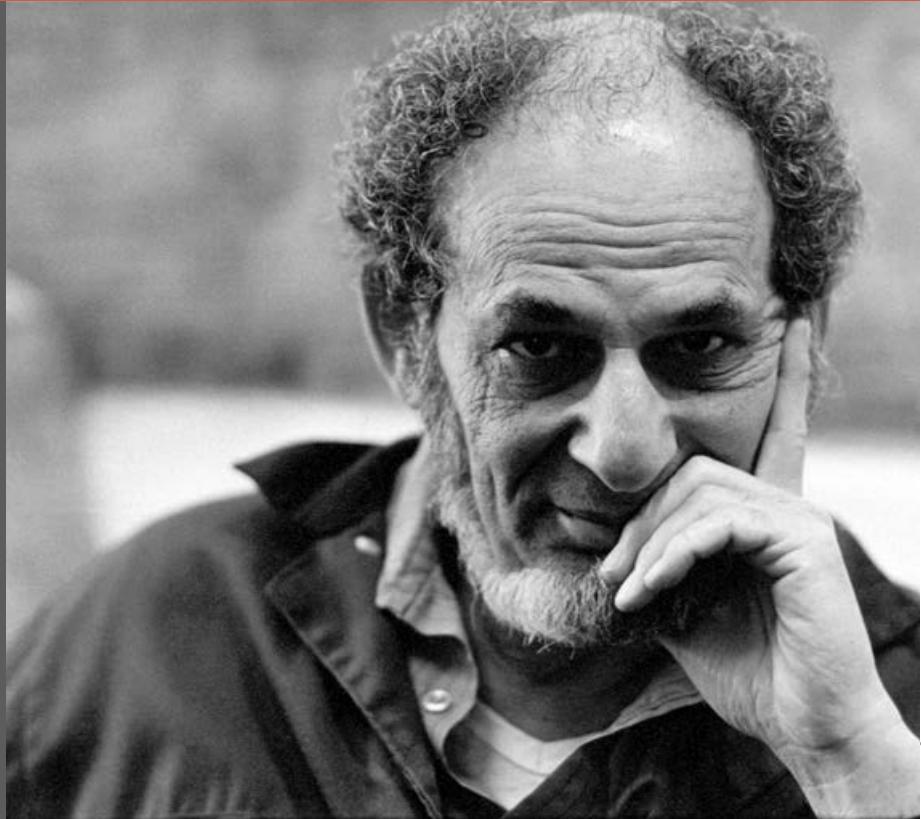


PHOTO BY CAROL KITMAN

About the Artist

A native New Yorker and long time resident of Leonia, NJ, Elias Friedensohn began exhibiting in 1951. Over the course of four decades, he had more than 40 one-person shows of paintings and sculpture.

After graduating from the High School of Music and Art in 1942, Friedensohn attended the Tyler School of Fine Arts at Temple University. He served with the army in Europe during World War II, received his B.A. from Queens College (CUNY) in 1948 and studied at the Institute of Fine Arts of NYU from 1949 to 1951. He joined the Queens College Art Department in 1959 and retired as Professor Emeritus of Art in 1987.

In addition to one-person exhibits in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Berkeley, Friedensohn's work has appeared in major national shows at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, The Whitney Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, the Smithsonian Institution and many others. His paintings and sculpture are represented in many permanent collections, including the Whitney Museum, the Sara Roby Foundation, the Minneapolis Museum of Art and the Los Angeles County Museum. Articles on the work have appeared in *Art News*, *Art Forum*, *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and other publications.

He has been the recipient of several prestigious awards including a Guggenheim grant, a Fulbright to Italy, and American Academy of Arts and Letters award, and grants from the New Jersey Council on the Arts.

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The Satires of Elias Friedensohn

The satirist knows his own bad character—and by extension the bad character of his friends and, especially, his enemies. He lives intimately with lust, envy and greed, with uncontrollable impulses and shameless vanity. Discomfort energizes his art. Elias Friedensohn's satirical subjects are flattened forms—not three dimensional women and men. With squiggly toes and bent, pointing fingers, they fidget, rage, gesticulate, and dance on the page. They levitate in pursuit of sex, only to assault their lovers in mid-air. Fearing bankruptcy and attendant humiliation, they dive out of windows. Neighbors watch, open-mouthed. Blind lovers, unmarked by place or time, reach with their tongues for connection. Assertive men in Arab markets sell live turkeys and caged birds; at home over tea, they prepare to sell their daughters. A naked woman with pale green flesh stabs her lover in the chest. An assassin with a bandaged hand and exposed, squiggly brains thrusts his gun into the heart of President McKinley. At the Wailing Wall, ecstatic believers surge heavenward, propelled by their own smug piety. Fanatics! Dangerous fellows!

Most viewers resist this display of in-your-face outrageousness. Heh, give us a break! Isn't everyday survival tough enough? Do I need reminding that I fought with my wife in bed last night instead of making sweet love? How I panicked when the market suddenly dropped? Friedensohn's line-driven, two dimensional forms are the protagonists of our sleepless nights and agitated day-dreaming. Confronting our demon selves in different cultural attire or no attire at all, we twitch and exclaim and yearn for a knock-out martini.

A tough-minded painter, my husband relished naming dark truths. He rendered them with wit, seductive beauty and even with loving care. He led us to the edge of a precipice, where—we were courageous enough—we could embrace our own demons. By accepting the propensity for evil in ourselves, we grasp the pleasures others take in cruelty. His satires are not for the weak of heart.

—Doris Friedensohn



Temptation of St. Anthony, 1

Watercolor on paper / 14" h x 10 1/4" w / 1978

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The Four Sons

It is by now a cliché of art criticism that we bring to seeing as much as the canvas brings to sight. I was reminded of that truism when I was told the title of the Friedensohn Satire I'd chosen to write about: The Four Sons. The sons are derived from the traditional Passover Haggadah; they are, as Wikipedia tells us, "one who is wise, one who is wicked, one who is simple, and one who does not know to ask."

And, indeed, there are four characters in the painting: one, gesticulating triumphantly (or pedantically?) and pointing to a perhaps sacred text; one, greenish and irritable; one spacy; and one I could not really classify. So, yes, they fit the framework the Haggadah provided—maybe.

But I had long since seen them otherwise. I already knew the main figure from the proud gestures with which he was interpreting the text open before him. Yes, the open-book letter is Hebrew, specifically shin (God's letter), as is what is coming from his mouth, but perhaps it was, nevertheless, Lenin on infantile leftism; the exultant motions and the triumphant smirk said as much. Or perhaps he was the class leader at my granddaughter's bat mitzvah, elucidating to the gathered, and wearied, friends and relations the significance of that Sabbath's text on the issue of the economics of divorce, or something along such lines, which I had missed the keys to since I was deep into a novel. In either event, he had clearly triumphed—at least in his own mind—over one of the other brothers, staring vaguely off into a space populated by more question marks than he can count on his fingers.

The green brother—who looks rather more like an exasperated sister, in fact—isn't staring or vague. She's pissed. She's heard all this before, and why is he running it all over again? Besides, she wants something she can get her teeth into, sharp little piranha teeth they are, too. She could be wicked; probably is intending to be. Meanwhile, she prefers the wine glass in front of her, and the innocent-looking snake wriggling above her head.

And then there's the fourth figure, head tilted back, as if gargling out the silent alef emerging from his mouth. The baseball cap mysteriously defying gravity to hold to his reddish hair expresses youth, yes, but are his arms upstretched in song (tra-la-la?), or prayer (In the beginning?), or self-absorption (I'm here, too)? Is he removing himself from the family drama, resetting it, or preparing to dance away? Who knows, for the satirist prefers Hebraic puzzles to answers.

—Paul Lauter



The Four Sons

Watercolor / 10 3/4" h x 15" w / 1979

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Defenestration Paintings

It's not often that we come across the word "defenestration." Catapulting a person from a window (or tossing oneself out in despair) is a sobering event. Our associations today may be linked to the horrifying scenes of people jumping to their deaths to escape the fire and smoke engulfing them when the World Trade Center buildings were attacked. Friedensohn worked much earlier. In fact the skillfully rendered, striking images of bodies falling from windows may have been made in response to perceived tragedies of the mid 1980's, no doubt stemming from financial disaster. He called them satires. Grotesque faces and twisted bodies whose enormous, gnarled hands particularly catch the eye, are tum-

bling from the heights surrounded by vivid colors, whether a fiery red sky or the startling, gold edged, green rays of a brilliant sun. The profusion of color actually suggests chaos, but it is tempered by humor. A striking example is that of a bare breasted woman in one painting, gazing up at a tumbling body while gently massaging the nipple of one breast between her fingers and cradling her other breast on her bent arm. Yes, there is humor here. Friedensohn's work fits into a long tradition of satirical grotesquerie. Think of the witches and diabolical creatures of Hieronymus Bosch. Or the peculiarly twisted facial expressions in the paintings of Bruegel the Elder. Or Goya's strange creatures flying through the air on broomsticks, or the vices of men suggested in his Caprices. Horror and humor go hand in hand in the work of all these artists.

—Claudia M. Bial



Grand Defenestration

Watercolor / 18 3/4" h x 15" w / 1989

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