

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.

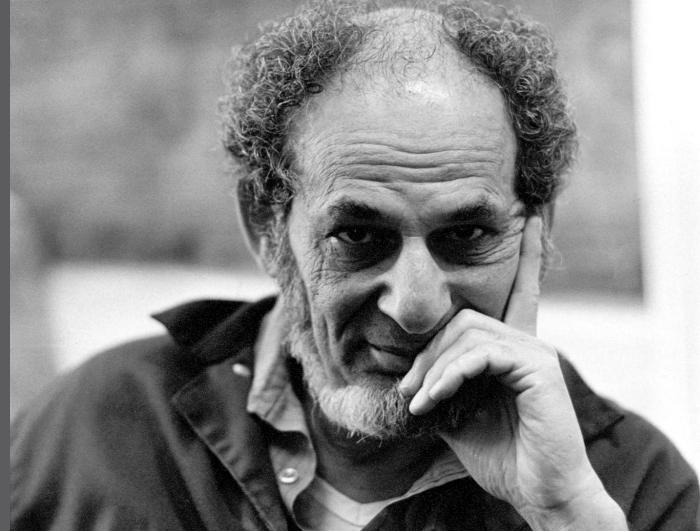


PHOTO BY CAROL KITMAN

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*, *Time Magazine* 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.

About This Issue:

Issue #2 of the Elias Friedensohn Newsletter continues to explore the artist's Satires. As recent events suggest, there's no end to human foolishness, depravity and suffering. These small scale watercolors offer edgy humor and a modicum of detachment. Wit doesn't diminish tragedy, Friedensohn would have said. But how would we maintain perspective without it?

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From Tunisia: Two Watercolors

How do we learn about cultures not our own? We can leave "home" for a country where English is not the first language. During his 1978-79 sabbatical, Eli Friedensohn experienced first-hand life in Tunisia, then a peaceful land with a history that included independence from French colonial rule in 1957. He recorded his musings in a series of satirical watercolor sketches.

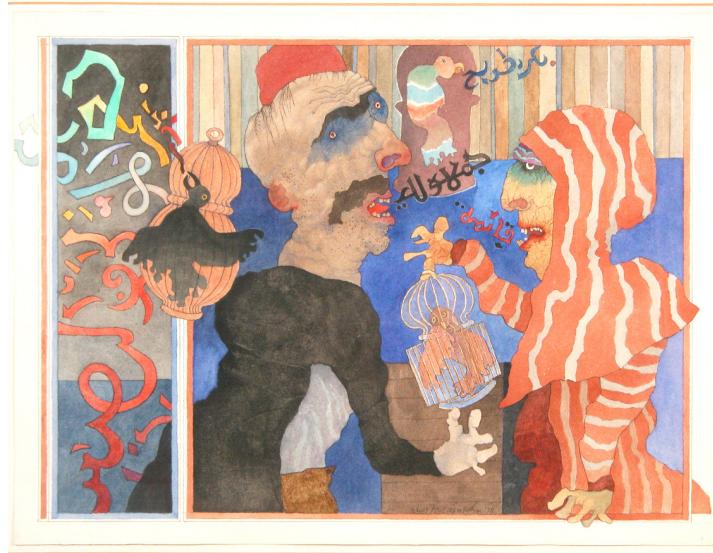
Tunisian Wedding Ululation

depicts a dynamic group of women whose tongues are askew as they animatedly honor the bride. They celebrate her by emitting high-pitched trilling sounds. In many Middle Eastern and North African communities, Muslim as well as Jewish, this is a marriage tradition. Although individualized, the female forms resemble one another and are all seen in full or three-quarters profile. Their upswept hair dos, swelling bosoms, and colorful attire curve and roll. Everything is in motion, yet the agitated figures remain fixed in place. The bride, the center of their attention, sits enthroned on a large chair to the left of the group, facing them. Although she shows no emotion, her hands and fingers, like those of her admirers, are full of movement. Her husband will not be entertained in this fashion by a male contingent of friends and family members.

Friedensohn often visited the daily market where vendors hawked their wares. *The Bird Vendor in the Souk* captures the lively social and business interactions between seller and buyer. In Tunisia, as in many other parts of the world, the initial price given for an item is never accepted; rather it must be negotiated through an elaborate performance piece. Bargaining, the only way to do business, is a game in which strategic discussions take place, back and forth, often for some time, to settle on the price. In the end, the buyer must make sure that the vendor saves face. The artist lets us know of the ongoing process by working beyond the border of the image. Birds sing their songs across the image with words, not musical notes, emerging from their throats. The vendor and her client spew forth words (calligraphic shapes). Pastel colors resemble those seen on sun-washed Mediterranean landscapes. The scale of the people—over-sized and crowded into the too small picture frame while the birds and their cages are miniaturized—gives the viewer an almost claustrophobic sense of souk life.

Thanks to Eli Friedensohn, we don't need a passport to visit Tunisia.

—Ferris Olin



The Bird Vendor in the Souk

Watercolor on paper / 12" h x 16" w / 1978

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Satirical Lovers

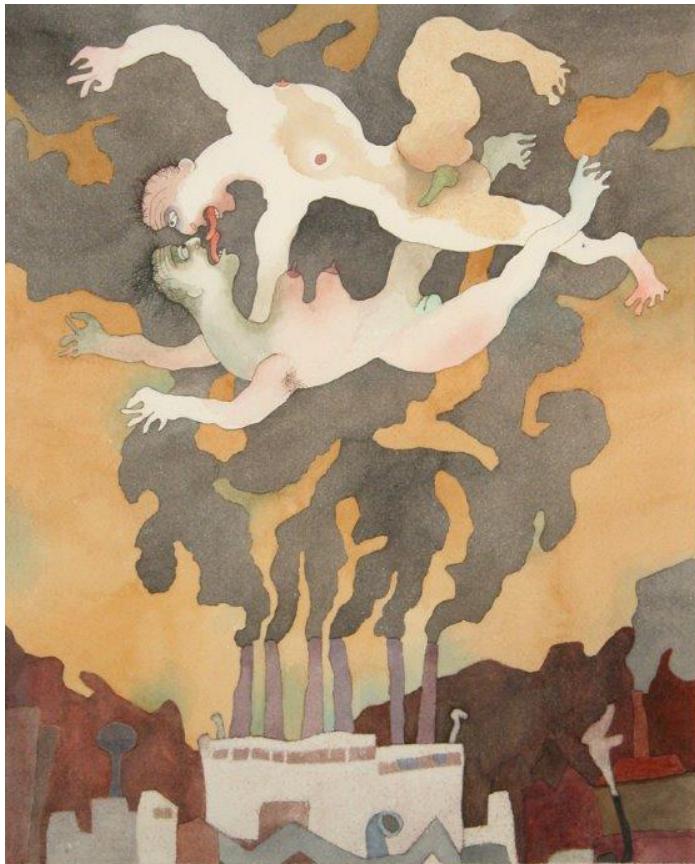
What can we expect from love? The satirist hedges his bets. Love is the answer, the reward for taking risks and living fully, the romantic Friedensohn declares. Love is a foolish dream, the cynic in him responds; lovers are blind to their own selfish drives and the relentless pressures of reality.

In "Apocalypse Lovers" (1978), smoke rises from an innocuous industrial site, filling the yellow sky. Two naked figures, stretched out parallel to the horizon, reach with their tongues for one another. Although the forms are flattened—with hands and feet almost comically animated—their proportions are classical, reminiscent of Greek gods. The male looms over the female, his face grim and his penis erect. She looks him in the eye, her gaze fierce and her full breasts like weapons at the ready. Friedensohn subsequently retitled this watercolor "Where there's smoke," signaling the lovers' fate. An end-of-days fire isn't yet visible. But the polluted environment will exact its price.

"Apocalypse II," (1978), also titled "Heat," shows two warring lovers within a circular frame. Red flames surge upward, threatening the male figure while the female hovers over him, spewing rage. Her red hair and pink-toned skin underscore a fiery temperament—and perhaps a revolutionary stance. Her aggression and fury, we assume, are responses to his dominance and abuse. Oh, foolish love: generating more heat than humans can manage.

The two watercolors are a pair. Neither the old pattern of patriarchy nor the revolt provoked by the Sexual Revolution will produce the dream of love. If the satires leave us squirming, perhaps the artist has succeeded. Like him, we grin, recoil and wallow in disappointment. But we keep hoping.

—Doris Friedensohn



Where there's Smoke

Watercolor / 11" h x 13 3/4" w / 1978

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Tongue

Elias Friedensohn's art speaks powerfully to our desperate human need to communicate. We see this in his early paintings, featuring mysterious figures with closed eyes or mouths, or no faces at all; also in pop figures with plugged ears or with hideous dentures instead of a mouth, and in the brilliant "Anatomy of Speech" paintings in the Secrets series. Friedensohn's work seems to ask, as the German poet Hölderlin would say: What are languages for in destitute times? Certainly not to communicate—in this senseless Babel of our time—as "Sunrise" and "Les amants aveugles" ("The Blind Lovers") uncannily suggest.

The only senses left to the artist's blind lovers are touch and taste. However, their grotesque, distorted bodies and fingers satirize sensuousness. Friedensohn won't allow the woman's tongue to lick the serpent coming out of the man's mouth. Language fails, and so does the body.

This powerful, grim picture has its redemption (of sorts) in "Sunrise." In that watercolor the phallic red tongue—as body—triumphs over the contorted hand of a body-less man. There will be speech!

—Irene Ramalho Santos



Les Amants aveugles

Watercolor / 8 3/4" h x 7 1/2" w / 1989



Sunrise (Tongue)

Watercolor / 5" h x 7" w / 1989

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