

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.

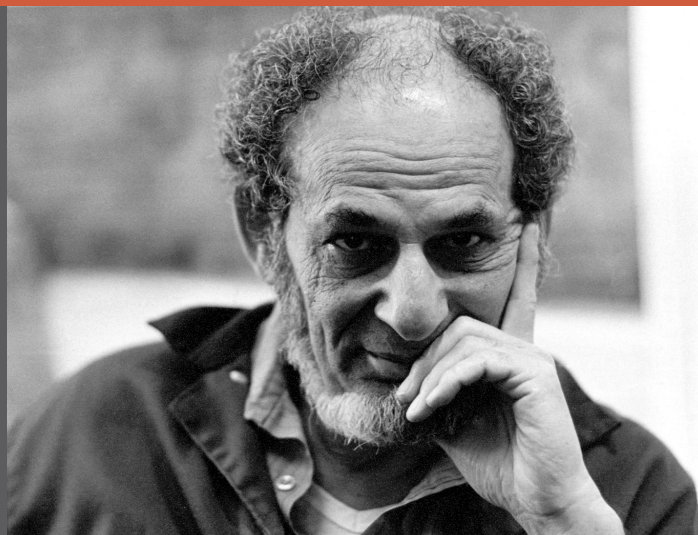


PHOTO BY CAROL KITMAN

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 was 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 #3 of the Elias Friedensohn Newsletter focuses on Airports. Today, in these familiar sites, feelings of vulnerability and existential angst undermine the thrill of travel. Airports, Friedensohn wrote, are everywhere the same, "temples celebrating speed and power where waiting is the common denominator."

Terrorist at Heathrow

In *Terrorist at Heathrow*, Elias Friedensohn hid the “terrorist,” a young child playing with a toy gun. He is behind a barricade of bright orange seating and between the more prominent figures of a potentially menacing punk on the left and the artist himself, who stands next to the child in a protective posture.

This painting dates from 1988, a few months before Pan Am Flight 103 flew out of Heathrow Airport with a bomb in its belly, headed for America. The bomb exploded as the plane was flying over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing all 259 people

on board and 11 people on the ground. Created not only before PanAm Flight 103 but before the events of 9/11, this work belongs to a milder era, when terrorism was smaller scale and a traveler’s toy gun or a Swiss Army knife passed unnoticed through baggage checks.

Elias Friedensohn’s airports are mostly quiet, lonely spaces with bored yet uneasy travelers. In his written remarks about the Airports, Friedensohn referred to his fellow travelers as anonymous individuals “carrying their sorrows inside their skulls.” Does anyone, in an airport today, have the luxury of quietly communing with her thoughts, let alone her sorrows? Today, the only escape from crowds, loudspeakers, and the tsunami of merchandise is airline’s private lounge, reserved for elite travelers.

In the 1980s, 30 million passengers moved through Heathrow annually. Today, it’s more than 70 million. In most airports now, the spaces connecting the main terminal to the gate areas are narrow chutes where travelers shed their shoes and their jewelry, hand over their water bottles and their dignity, and submit to x-ray machines and pat-downs in exchange for presumed safety.

In one way, the relatively peaceful space depicted in *Terrorist at Heathrow* anticipates the massacre—and the gantlet—about to come. The fluorescent light tubes, not unlike the shape of traditional bombs, multiplied by reflection and refraction in the big glass window, seem to be on a trajectory toward the plane waiting on the tarmac.

—Theresa Forsman
December 2015



Terrorist at Heathrow

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

Guided by the Power of Wings:

Artist Shows Airports in a Different Light

—John Zeaman, Art Critic, *The Bergen Record*

October 6, 1991

We so rarely encounter an artist anymore whose paintings function on all the levels of which painting is capable. That is, an artist who understands abstract values, who can orchestrate complex compositions that include figures, interiors and landscapes, and who can make both a social and personal statement. Elias Friedensohn who died of cancer at age 66, a little more than a month ago, was such an artist ...

For Friedensohn the airport was a metaphor for our time. Airports represent the global village in which we live, a world made smaller by speed and technology, but also a world made more alienating and impersonal, and—in the case of terrorism—one in which violence can be random and unpredictable.

These paintings make us aware of what a strange environment an airport is, a place where the primary inhabitants are not so much people as flying machines and where the distinction between inside and outside is always blurred. Our eyes are repeatedly drawn from the waiting room to the outdoors, but what we find outdoors is not exactly nature—certainly not trees and fields. The monstrous planes out on the tarmac seem to have a life of their own, feeding through gasoline-carrying umbilical cords and disgorging passengers through accordion-like tunnels that clamp into their sides.

Friedensohn even manages to use the airport motif to comment on the world of appearances, raising questions about what we see and don't see ... Images from outside mix with those from inside ... where our view of the tarmac is populated by the apparitions of people in the waiting room ...

Friedensohn was a bold artist who cared little for the vicissitudes of fashion. He was a figurative painter back in the Fifties when abstract art reigned, in the Sixties when pop was all the rage, in the Seventies when minimalism and photo-realism were the thing, and in the Eighties when graffiti and conceptual games were the hot tickets. He persisted through all this, getting recognition but not all that he deserved. He was an artist who not only had talent, intelligence and knowledge, but that all-important thing so absent in the art world today: character.



Heathrow I

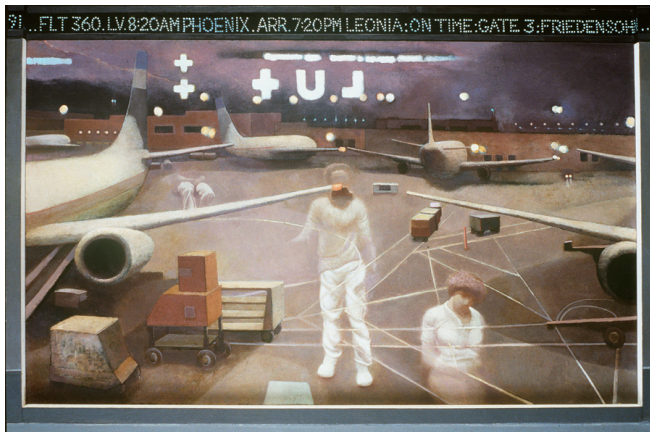
Oil on Wood / 17 1/2"h x 23 1/2"w / 1988

Phoenix II

Once there were three home plate umpires in conversation about their calling. The first asserted that he could call 'em as they actually are: "My balls ARE balls," he declared. The second claimed less: "I call 'em as I see 'em." The third, with a wink and a smile, said, "They ain't nothin' till I call 'em."

Elias Friedensohn, like the third umpire, had a touch of the wizard. He knew that he could make his intentions happen on canvas and paper, in oil and watercolor and charcoal and ink, with wood and with clay.

That's how I see "Phoenix II". Much about it seems descriptive, literal. But only momentarily. The blue-green electronic message across the top gives flight information for "Friedensohn." But are there direct flights from Phoenix to Leonia, NJ? And do they take 9 hours?



Phoenix II

Oil on Canvas / 60"h x 84"w / 1990

information, with the tarmac also reflected through a window behind them. That could explain the odd sizes and spatial dispositions of the planes and the reverse letter "L." But it can't, really: the tall man's face is behind the wingtip, not superimposed as in a reflection. And the bizarre white lines are in front of and behind the figures and passing right through them, too. Can't be—not in direct visual reality, and not in reflected reality either!

Is? Seems? Real? Reflected? Can't be! So?

In this painting, and so many others, the artist shows that while beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, art is in the maker's hands.

—Stanley Bailis

The image below that message is at first glance a commonplace tarmac scene. We observe a pair of standing figures, surely the artist and his lady -- their long, lean bodies, her dandelion pouf, his Ahab beard. But they're dressed in some kind of unaccustomed white: clinical? Spiritual? Ghostly? Dreamy? And they are standing where? If on the tarmac, he is 20 feet tall or more because his face is behind the wingtip of a plane beside him. If not on the tarmac, then maybe in some interior space reflected in a glass screen below the flight

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