

# 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.

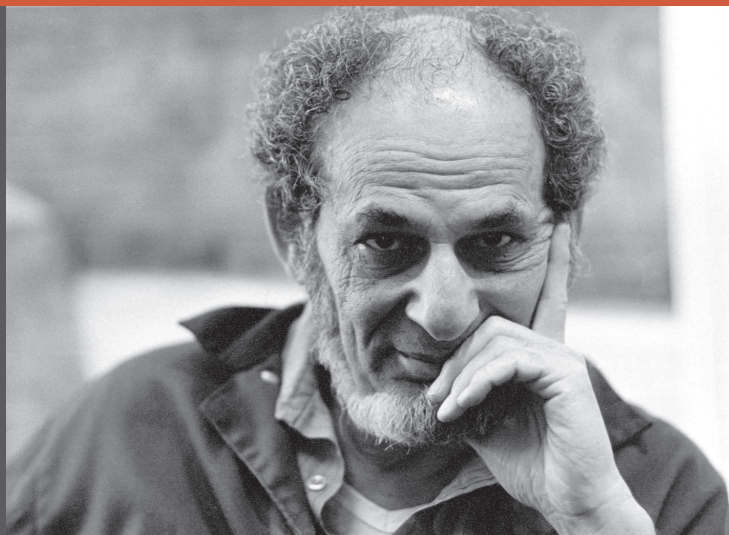


PHOTO BY CAROL KITMAN

## About the Artist and This Issue

A native New Yorker and long time resident of Leonia, NJ, Elias Friedensohn began exhibiting in 1951. He joined the Queens College, CUNY, Art Department in 1959 and retired as Professor Emeritus of Art in 1987.

Over the course of four decades, he had more than 40 one-person shows of paintings and sculpture. In addition to solo exhibits in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Berkeley, his work has appeared in major national shows at the Corcoran Gallery, The Whitney Museum, the Art Institute of

Chicago, the Smithsonian Institution, and many others. Articles on his work have been published in Art News, Art Forum, Art in America, The New York Times, Time Magazine and many other newspapers and magazines.

**Issue #4** of the Newsletter focuses on the artist's hat-blocks. Using aged wooden objects—often but not always head-sized—he created a portrait gallery of monsters, freaks, and unexpected charmers, too. Viewers wonder, are these the heads of Aliens or our hidden selves?

## Upcoming gallery show: **Hat Block Sculptures and Crows**

Works by Elias Friedensohn



### **Luise Ross Gallery**

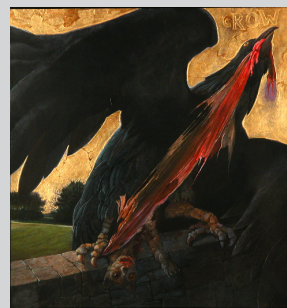
547 West 27 Street, #504  
New York, NY 10001

### **Dates:**

8 March – 9 April

### **Opening:**

Saturday, March 19, 3 – 5 p.m.





**Kiss Me!**

Carved and assembled wood  
and other materials

11"h x 9"w

Circa 1979

**Her Companion**

Carved and assembled wood  
and other materials

16 1/2"h x 14"w

Circa 1979

**Ms. "Kiss Me" and "Her Companion"**

I have never been partial to hats. On the other hand, my mother was a milliner. Partly for that reason, I am grateful to my old friend Eli Friedensohn for getting me to think all these years after his death (and my mother's) about hat-blocks.

Hat blocks, carved out of wood into the shape of a head, are used by hat makers or milliners to produce a hat. You can pound nails into them without making a mess, as Eli and other artists have done. They must have reminded Eli specifically of blockheads: people he didn't think much of who appear in his playful, disturbing drawings in very different forms, as boneless grotesques encumbered by their tender, twitching, kinky sexual parts. Was Eli obsessed by the play of sex in our lives? Or was he angry at men and women stupidly enslaved to desire? Or did he see a heady mix of both—a block-heady mix?

Eli's hard, tough blockheads pose an artistic question: how much can you strip away from a figure and still denote a recognizable human being? What kind of basic form evokes someone you could love—or hate? "Kiss Me" and "Her Companion" both have a head with a face on it and a pair of hands—surrendering or beseeching? Many nails have been hammered into the cheeks of the female, but they do not interfere with her cheerful aspect. Do they mime or mock a charming sprinkling of freckles—or pimples? The male, with an expressionless mouth, is stamped with nipples like medals, and adorned with stringy hair; on the female there is a strip of fur, perhaps borrowed from a place much further down.

Friedensohn's matched pair of heads represent whole persons. The female's fetching, hard-edged pink lips reach up in a friendly, needy way—"kiss me." The impassive male reaches with hands that seem to shrug her off. Neither has eyes to look back at our own—which stare, wide open in astonishment.

—Rachel Brownstein

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## The Scramble for Identity

An excerpt from the book *The Hatblock Sculptures of Elias Friedensohn*

At one stage of my father's work he became enamored of hat-blocks that he would find in local flea markets. The simple wood forms had beautifully aged and worked organic surfaces. He dug out an identity for each of them adding appendages and accessories as he pleased. What came out of this process was truly revealing.

In "Kiss Me," a voluptuous set of red lips beckons. But her cheeks sport sharp nails facing towards us. To approach the promised land of bliss, we must consider the suffering involved. Her white gloved hands lure us in. But she has no eyes. Perhaps no conscience. Regardless, we feel compelled to approach. We will forsake our best interest to be consumed by sensual delight. That is our true wish.

"Surprised When Opened" forces us to ask if our senses are misleading us. What kind of picture do they really form of our world?

In "Blind," the only sense organ is a mouth: a mouth with teeth

clenched, bracing against the mud (or the feces?) that obscures the the rest of his/her senses.

The zippered collar suggests that he is captive to this ordeal; perhaps submissive. We wonder: is it possible to find ourselves in the clean and the pure—or must we journey into filth? Will we ever know anything if we don't transcend our social veils?

Yet another danger awaits us. We might become religious or worse yet, we might become pious and proud of it. In "The Puritan," my father warns that religion without deviance is perilous. Is there any protection from our base elements and desires? The Puritan's helmet-like hat covers his ears—keeping out the defiled world around him. It supports his intolerant view. (Perhaps he's the father of today's GOP.)

Everyone loves to play dress-up. We are never quite comfortable being naked as we are. Perhaps we can armor ourselves with some discarded bottle caps or add piercings to show how tough we are. With the blessings of plastic surgery, we can rearrange our organs to fit the latest fashion. It is human nature to try on identities. Can you not find a piece in this collection that doesn't fit? Having the courage to try it on is another matter.

—Adam Friedensohn



### Kiss Me!

11"h x 9"ww

Circa 1979

### Surprised When Opened

8"h x 8"w

Circa 1979

### The Puritan (Let Us Pray)

14"h x 9"w

Circa 1978

### Blind

10"h x 9"w

Circa 1979

All pieces are carved and assembled wood, oil paint and various other assembled materials.

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### Nail Head

“Nail Head,” male and life-sized, sports a dozen bulky black nails in each eye socket. Half are conventionally hammered in with their tips piercing the socket and the other half with their blunt ends jammed into the wood. Brutally blinded! Nailed and bloodied, too! A reddish brown and black sludge covers the head. The mouth, slightly ajar and with nail heads for teeth, emits a silent scream.

What was my husband thinking, in the late 1970's, when he created this terrifying fellow from an innocent wooden hat-block? Contemplate “the heart of darkness.”? Look upon my face (ye mortals) and despair? “Nail Head” evokes the almost unviewable violence to which we humans are prone. But on my living room bookshelf he appears unexpectedly tamed, domesticated. After the initial shock, a wry laugh is permitted. Even a tentative caress.



Nail Head

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

In fact, “Nail Head” is a misnomer for this sculpture fashioned from a hat-block. Invoking magical power, Eli titled him “Eye Fetish.” Why create such a horror without envisioning the possibility of redemption, as primitive people did? Eli was fascinated by African artists’ abstracted approaches to the figure in particular and human suffering in general. He appreciated the genius of African masks in evoking not just individual misery but the devastation wrought by despots and their minions.

Some of Eli’s hat-block heads have missing eyes or ears. Others have misshapen noses or no features at all. Maimed heads. Heads almost blank with resignation. Heads speaking resistance. “Nail Head” and his cohort of damaged freaks test our tolerance for depravity. How often can we gaze at the viciously blinded fellow? What does it take to absorb so much violence without banishing the messenger from one’s living room?

It’s the task of the artist, my husband believed, to make our demons (even the worst of them) seductively, unexpectedly and even perversely beautiful. Thus we come to enjoy spending time with them and, in brave moments, we absorb their meanings.

—Doris Friedensohn

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