

the art of elias friedensohn

1924—1991

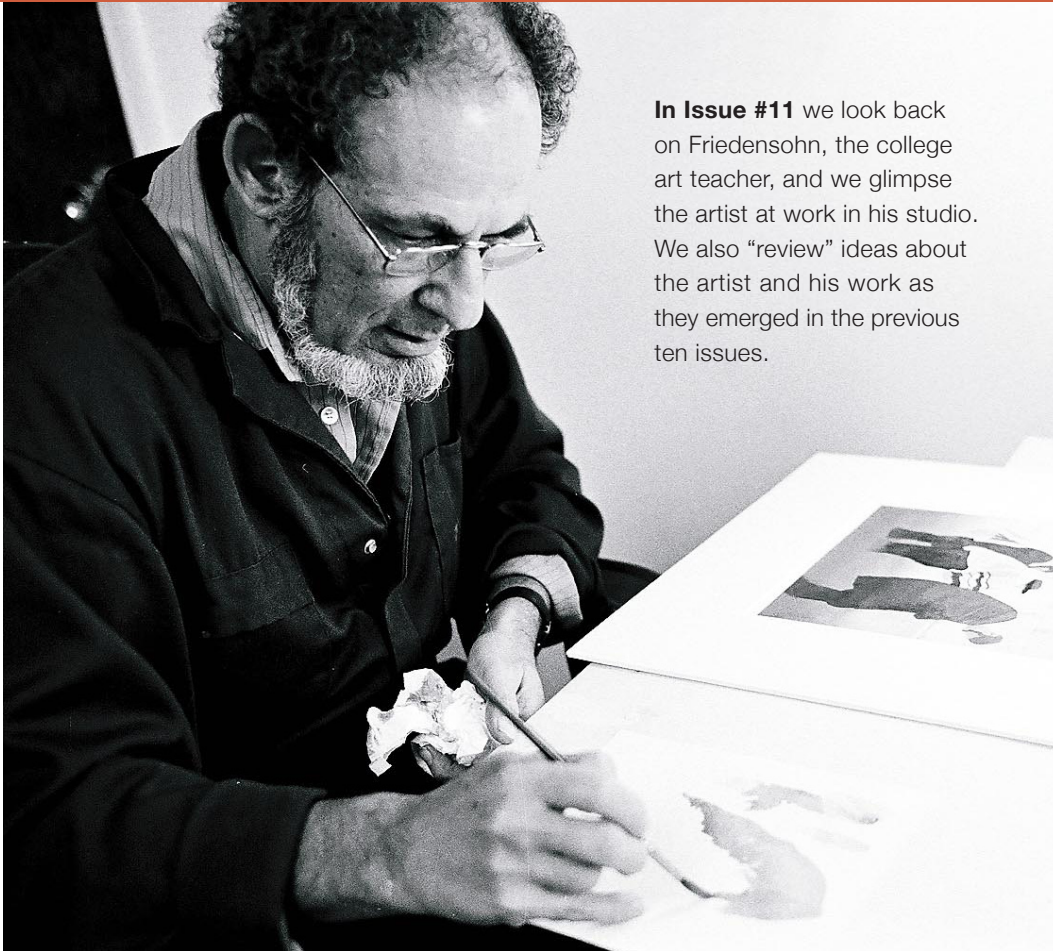


PHOTO BY CAROL KITMAN

In Issue #11 we look back on Friedensohn, the college art teacher, and we glimpse the artist at work in his studio. We also “review” ideas about the artist and his work as they emerged in the previous ten issues.

Elias Friedensohn, an Appreciation By Peter London

What does one want from a teacher? Perhaps similar qualities one looks for in an artist. First integrity; then fierceness of spirit, a sweeping intelligence made approachable by kindness beyond our deserve. Articulateness, not wordiness. And illusiveness, fascinating illusiveness. These would be what I seek in an artist and art teacher. These same qualities are what I had as a student of Elias Friedensohn.

When Eli burst on the scene at Queens College in the late '50's (he did burst on the scene), the art department was a quiet, predictable place. Fine arts here, art history there, crafts nowhere. A nice place. Eli soon fixed that. As one of the first acts as the faculty advisor to the art students association, he gathered together a few of us to speak to the question “why I am an artist” before an audience of our peers and faculty. That damned question: it bothers me still. His dark energy and his prowling eyes got us all jumping. Ideas and enterprises started to arise, swirl around the place.

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Tough questions, difficult images, perplexing assignments, some awful and some radiant responses. He made us hop.

I didn't mention bravery as an essential trait of an artist or art teacher. Eli seemed very brave to us. I say "seemed brave" because he might not have felt that what he did and said were particularly brave. Merely natural and necessary. But to us he did seem brave, raising issues, proposing projects, doing things that no one else had dared before. His stepping forward cleared the way for us less certain students to test the power and range of our own voices.

Most of us came from working class families, which, if they were familiar with contemporary trends in art, certainly knew no contemporary artists. So how were we to know how artists did what they did: how artists thought, saw things and thus lived? We knew how to make art. What we didn't know was how to construct a life that could sustain us and be compatible with making art. Eli opened his mind to us, his heart, and his home. He helped us imagine the features of a chosen life, an artist's life so different from what our own parents could provide.

Eli Friedensohn helped us to see, to think, to dare, and to sing. Now without the help of their author, as is the case of artists of good measure, his work continues to delight and instruct. ■



PHOTO BY CAROL KITMAN

Fan Mail from a Newsletter Reader

As a fan of these Newsletters, I am struck by many appreciations of what I consider to be Friedensohn's major feature as a painter: his voracious passion for life. Life as we know and live it, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, joyous and saddening, exhilarating and sobering.

It is true that many of Friedensohn's paintings (the "satires" in particular) are mercilessly comic. With his grotesques, Friedensohn seems to comment on the inadequacy of human suffering. But the point is not to suspend feeling and let the intellect explain the farcical cruelty of life. The point is to feel the pain that comes with understanding the worst demons plaguing human life, while continuing to value life. Perhaps this kind of meaning comes across most vividly in Friedensohn's "Advertisements for Apocalypse." It is as if the painter had foreseen in the late 1960s the desolate wasteland to which global financial capitalism would condemn us fifty years later. (Continued) ▼



A Little Child Shall Lead Them | Oil on canvas | 80"h x 94"w | 1970–1977

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Stavros

Oil on Canvas

38"h x 48"w

1974



Even the most beautiful and serene of Friedensohn's works (some of his "Utopias," for example) seem to come with tongue-in-cheek. See the gorgeous pair of lovers in "Stavros," rising impossibly to the size of high mountains in an idyllic landscape. Only the stunning charcoal drawings of Maine landscapes, verging on the sublime, are without people and thus free of his characteristic critique and edginess.

There are also the Friedensohn not-ready-mades: the hat block sculptures. I imagine the always already there: objects to help construct other things. Like hat blocks for making hats. The artist looks at them, smooth wood waiting to be useful, and thinks of real heads and what is often done to them out of cruelty or out of simple, innocent mischief. He may wonder at heads that are no more than blocks into which you would be tempted to nail in some sense. Or he may just have fun imagining all these things. As in "Kiss Me" and "Her Companion." Have we perhaps lost the meaning of kissing, the artist wonders?

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Kiss me! and Companion

Carved and assembled wood

11"h x 9"w x 9"d

Circa 1979



The Tree of Death

Watercolor

14 1/2"h x 10 1/4"w

1987

My favorite pieces in these newsletters so far are the crows. We have two in Portugal, one in our apartment in Coimbra, just a few blocks from the University; and the other at our farm in Quintela. Eli offered them to us as house-warming gifts when we moved to the new apartment on Rua Antero de Quental in 1987. He had followed his wife, Doris, when she became a Fulbrighter in my department of Anglo-American Studies at the University of Coimbra.

Those crows presiding over both our houses are more than our Lares and Penates, our guardians of the household. As Eli reinvented them in his *The Book of Crows* (1988) –“crows are our emblematic bird.” The crows he gave us keep reminding us of the joys and sorrows of being mortal: our lust and ambitions, our yearning for peace and love, our constant relapse into hatred and violence. Emblematic for Eli in this sense, too, then. Not the American eagle, the imperially arrogant bird with only one meaning – limitless power – but rather the multifaceted crow reflecting our human strengths, frailties, and vulnerabilities. ■

—Irene Ramalho Santos

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.

Books available (please see next page)

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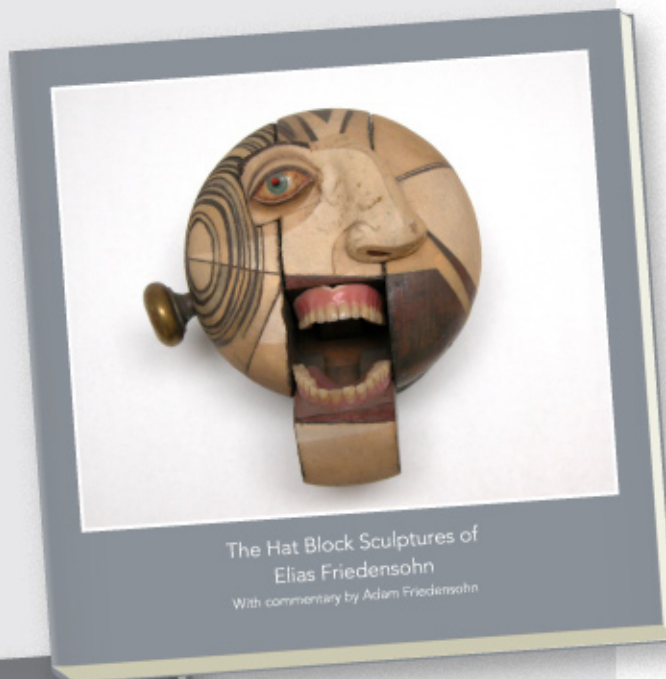
Books

Two full-color books on work by Elias Friedensohn are available for order:

The Hat Block Sculptures of Elias Friedensohn, designed and with text by Adam Friedensohn

and

The True Book of Crows, designed by Shola Friedensohn and with text by Elias Friedensohn



These handsome books illuminate two aspects of this multi-faceted artist's oeuvre.

New price:

each book is \$50, which includes shipping and handling; add 7% NJ sales tax of \$3.50.

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To order, please contact:

doris.friedensohn@verizon.net with your order. She will request your mailing address, phone number (for delivery purposes) and check. Your order will be shipped directly to the address you provide.

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