

the art of elias friedensohn

1924—1991



The Assassination Machine | Mixed media | 3'h x 4'w x 2'd | 1964–1967

Issue #12 looks back at the 1901 murder of an American President. Friedensohn's 1967 multi-media show, *The Assassination of McKinley and the Trial of Czolgosz*, lured the viewer into a courtroom, a prison, and a place to play with guns. A killer and his victim are "on trial"—and so, in a fashion, are we.

The Murder of a President

In the overheated political season prior to the 2016 election, I visited my husband's "Assassination Machine" in its hiding place in our basement. What a moment, I thought—as Americans fume about who's the most abominable politician—to bring it upstairs and give friends an eyeful!

Once upon a time, in the early 60's, Eli built a box about half the length of a coffin, painted it bright red with the words "Assassination Machine"

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Portrait of the Assassin/Diagram Showing
Where Bullet Entered the Body of Victim

Gouache on paper | 39 1/2 "h x 25 1/2"w | 1964–1967

a goofy smile on his face, occupies center stage. Czolgosz wears a brown suit and a matching brown derby. His brains, blue and worm-like, pop out of the hat. Emerging from the left side of his jacket is a full, not quite female breast with a shapely nipple. The Assassin's soft penis, on display, threatens no one. In his right hand, extended toward the victim, is a gun covered with a gauzy bandage. We see a bullet—vivid against a white stripe—headed straight at the President.

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scrawled in blue and green, and set it on a table. At the front end, he cut out a space the size of a fist; above the opening he inserted a metal peephole for viewing the target. At the end of a brass chain hanging alongside, he attached a cap pistol—not a plastic version for six year olds but the kind that inner city cops often mistake for the real thing.

The dead President pictured inside the box at the far end isn't the charismatic JFK or the noble Lincoln but the aloof Imperialist William McKinley. His assassin, the Anarchist foreigner, Leon Czolgosz, chose the World's Fair of 1905 to offer the President a bandaged handshake. The bandage concealed a gun which left a bullet in the President's heart. Czolgosz, a disciple of Emma Goldman and a friend of the Downtrodden, worked alone.

The artist's *Diagram Showing Where Bullet Entered the Body of Victim* provides telling details. We see two figures, the Assassin and the President, against a background of horizontal red and white stripes. We recognize the flag stripped of stars and the President, identified by his top hat, at the far right edge of the composition. The Assassin, with



Mother of the Assassin

Gouache and charcoal pencil on paper | 30"h x 22 1/4"w
Circa 1964



Mother of the Victim

Gouache and charcoal pencil on paper | 22 1/4"h x 30"w
Circa 1964

Assassination is regularly on our radar these days. But what lured Eli, a half century ago, into this bizarre endeavor? Accident is the short answer. On Deer Isle, Maine, during the summer of 1963, Eli focused on the sea, the sky, the shifting light, and the shore. Charcoal on white paper, day after day. Then, in the midst of this soul-soothing routine, he stumbled upon a book, *The Illustrious Life of William McKinley, Our Martyred President*. The author, Murat Halstead, revered McKinley, whom he called “that noblest, most tender and generous of men.” Bent on avenging the President’s death, he vilified the assassin, Czolgosz, and all assassins. It was time, he announced, “to draw the sword of Liberty.” Czolgosz, probably quite crazy (but not necessarily crazier than Halstead), was tried and swiftly condemned to death.

Halstead’s McKinley and Czolgosz, so different in situation and status, reminded Eli of “reversible parts of a single idea”: the privileged, complacent insider and the idealistic (and maybe nutty) outsider, both caught in the whirlwind of history. To underscore that point, he created for his protagonists similar family photo albums, including mothers who resembled one another. However, he vowed to show more compassion for the unknown killer with the unpronounceable name than for his victim; and he gave himself permission to invent as he pleased.

Then, in November of 1963, as Eli was immersed in his version of this 1905 drama, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. “I felt like I had been practicing voodoo,” Eli wrote. “My resurrection of the long-dead president and his killer had taken on a destructive energy of its own. . . Symbols and metaphors are not supposed to behave like that.” Unnerved, he abandoned the project for a year before returning to work.

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Panel of Jurists | Construction, acrylic on wood and canvas | 17 3/4"h x 24 1/4"w | 1967



The show, a multi-media happening, opened at the Terry Dintenfass Gallery in October 1967. Calliope music evoked the World's Fair where McKinley was shot. Taped political speeches, punctuated by cheering and applause, added to the carnival spirit. Visitors approached the "Assassination Machine" with a mix of horror, hesitation and eagerness. A few caressed the gun. Many reached into their pockets for a quarter to place in the slot of a plastic hand attached to the box. Shooting the President seemed easy.

Two free standing, 6' tall walls, each with a courtroom on one side and a jail scene on the other, focused visitors' attention on rituals of law and order, justice and punishment. For the courtroom, the judges' dais and jury box, Eli used marquetry patterns of actual veneer: elaborate surfaces, parading Justice. The jail, on the other hand, was unadorned, grim.

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Jurors (Courtroom Fragment)

Mixed Media, embedded bas relief, maquette | 65"h x 33"w | 1963-1966



Visiting Day

Illuminated box, mixed media

18"h x 12 1/4"w x 9 1/2"d

1966

An ordinary chair, placed between the walls, gave spectators an “on-site” opportunity to sit and contemplate Democracy in Action. What is the relation between power and punishment, justice and truth? Judges, jurors and spectators, partially painted and in shallow relief, all have the same white, male, mask-like faces. Officialdom personified. We don't see the prisoner, but the prison guard hovers anxiously. Are we ourselves the assassin, sitting in the cell?

There's a coda to this story. A half century after Eli's McKinley-Czolgosz exhibit and a century after the assassination, Czolgosz has once again surfaced. Just as Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were preparing for Presidential Debate #2 in St. Louis, *The New York Times* reported that bones from a prison cemetery in Auburn, NY had turned up in a garden a few miles away. A farmer, quoted in the article, claimed that they were ruining the taste of his vegetables. Czolgosz, according to the report, died in that prison. His bones—a possibility beyond Eli's most perverse imaginings—may still be haunting us. What is their message? What have we learned from a century of vast inequality and violence? The answer, my husband would have insisted, depends on who's telling the tale.

—Doris Friedensohn

NOTE:

During 2017, we will begin publishing four times a year. Many of Friedensohn's important works—including Early Paintings, Tunisian Pastorals, Jerusalem Shadows and Pop Sculptures—are on our schedule for the coming year. We welcome your feedback and send warm wishes for the New Year.

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)

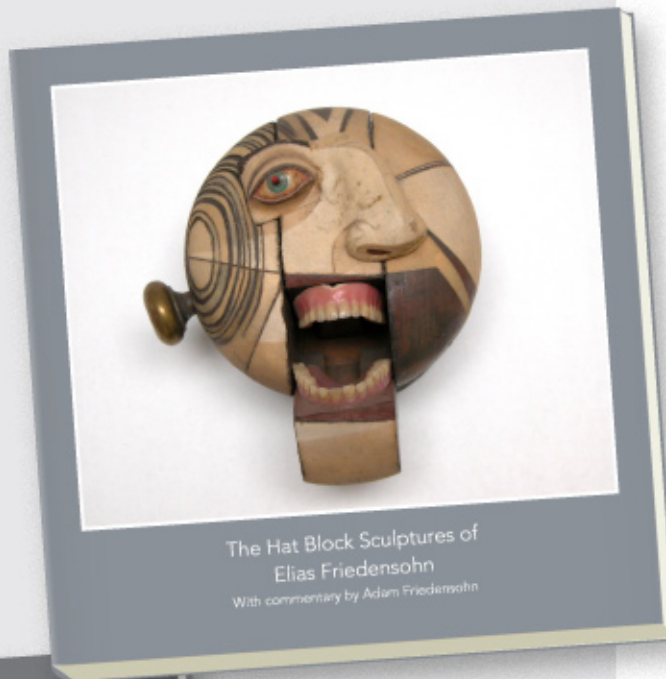
Books

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.

TOTAL PRICE: \$53.50

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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