

Independent

Irving Marcus: Estranging the Image

by Eli Diner

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Irving Marcus, *Bootleg*, 1983, oil on canvas, 46 1/4 x 60 1/4 inches (117.4 x 153 cm), courtesy of Parker Gallery, Los Angeles

“Will success spoil Irving Marcus?” critic and art historian John Fitz Gibbon mused ironically in a 1976 profile of the California painter and educator. “A whole lot of people don’t ask themselves this question because a whole lot of people have never heard of Irving Marcus.”

If Marcus is better known today, thanks in large part to a 2018 retrospective at the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis, the gist of Fitz Gibbon’s quip still holds. With his ardent inquiry into color and obsessive reworking of newspaper imagery, Marcus was an idiosyncratic artist whose work may never fall into neat critical or commercial categories. Yet he bridged several art historical

currents during his lifetime, and now, two years since his death, his practice is coming up for reassessment. For its group presentation at Independent, Los Angeles-based Parker Gallery will pair Marcus’s 1980s paintings with new works by Marley Freeman and Keegan Monaghan.

Of course, there is more than one measure of success, and Marcus was surely recognized by the generations of students who trained with him at Sacramento State University between 1959 and 1991, or by the faculty he brought in, helping to shape a key node of Northern California art in the late 1960s and 70s.

Born and raised in Minneapolis, Marcus served in the Korean War, and taught in several art departments before his appointment at Sacramento State. At the time of his arrival his work was an orthodox Abstract Expressionism, but within a few years, inspired by Bay Area Figuration, he had turned apostate, producing flushed scenes with Fauvist echos. He exhibited canvases and oil pastel drawings at Adeliza McHugh’s new Candy Store Gallery in nearby Folsom, which by the late 60s had become a prominent venue for the wild, gnarly, humorous, and cartoonish art often grouped under the labels Funk and Nut. These predominantly Northern California artists—including Robert Arneson, Clayton Bailey, Roy De Forest, David Gilhooly,

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Jack Ogden (Marcus's former student and later Sacramento State colleague), and William T. Wiley—presented a happily rude counterpoint to the Los Angeles Cool School and New York's minimalist and conceptual art movements.

If Marcus's fin-de-siècle evocations of Matisse or Vuillard set him apart from the Funk circle—he wasn't included in Peter Selz's landmark 1967 exhibition *Funk in Berkeley*—his intense coloration and démodé indulgences were not entirely out of place there. In fact, he helped guide the Candy Store's program with introductions and suggestions for McHugh, including Chicago Imagists Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson, whom he brought to teach in Sacramento after becoming chair of the art department in 1966.

At the end of the decade a shift took place in Marcus's process that would define his work for the rest of his career: he began painting from photographs clipped from newspapers. Unlike the uses of the photographic image made by Pop artists or photorealist painters, however, Marcus completely eschewed any trace of mechanical reproduction or verisimilitude. The lines are jittery, the surfaces wavering, and the colors vertiginous. Much of Marcus's work from the 1970s bears a resemblance to the blurriness and oversaturation of a lot of video art of the period. However, his style also reflects his peculiarly involved process. From a projected photograph he would make a freehand graphite drawing, which became the basis for sometimes several studies in oil pastel crayon. He would finally translate one of these to canvas, his paintings studiously mimicking the effects of pastel.

Marcus could be quite coy, even dismissive, about the significance of the newspaper imagery he chose, claiming it was often arbitrary and that the photos served only as a basis for formal explorations of composition and color. Yet his subject matter through the first half of the 70s is too consistent to be written off, nearly always depicting animals or human-animal interaction. Whether cute curiosities, like the surfing dog in *He Taught Himself* (1969), or moments of violence, as in *Dying Mountain Lion* (1973) or *Horse Falls Jumping* (1975), Marcus's animal paintings exude a deeply ironic sensibility. Their iridescence and bleary forms create a sense of estrangement, rendering the scenes spectacles of human folly. He might introduce elements of caricature, as in *King and Queen of Household Royalty* (1971), in which two elderly women clutch their beloved cats—human and pet faces and hands rendered in a naive style that plays up the picture's weirdness. Only rarely did the work verge on critique, and never so sharply as in *Dead Guerillas* (1973), with its line of soldiers, mass of corpses, and a lion observing from a mural on the wall behind.

Marcus later became wary of such clearly decipherable imagery. He began to alter the orientation of the photographs or to incorporate multiple images, collage-like, into his preparatory studies, sometimes at different scales. Any sense of a photographic source disappeared in these strangely placeless, dreamlike paintings. In the early 80s, Marcus's palette likewise shifted, darkening around the fluorescent colors to create the impression of a neon-lit nightworld.

In the ominous street scene *Sharply Divided Crowd* (1985)—one of three paintings from this period that Parker Gallery is exhibiting at Independent—the figures are barely legible, faces and bodies subsumed in a maelstrom of shadow and streaking color. Turned upside down, the canvas reveals an entirely different picture—more easily parsed, if no less menacing in mood—of seated male spectators, perhaps at a boxing match, or an auction. The other two Marcus works in the presentation, *Hacienda Asylum* (1983) and *Bootleg* (1983), are similarly turbulent, full of obscure metamorphoses, sudden shifts of texture, and the emerging and submerging of forms.

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