

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Irving Marcus, master of ‘simultaneous contradictions,’ gets overdue recognition



“Call for Bids,” 1973, by Irving Marcus. oil on canvas. BEN BLACKWELL

“You’ve got to grow old,” mused Irving Marcus, “to realize the potential of paint.”

At 89, Marcus is having his first-ever retrospective at the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis. The 60-odd works in the show (mostly oil paintings and oil pastels, plus a few graphite drawings) bear witness to his realization of that potential and make one wonder what took the official art world so long to recognize it.

Asked about the exhibition, the ever-self-critical artist said, “It’s the first show I’ve had where I was not the one to pick out the work. The paintings I would have included. Some of the drawings, I’m not so sure.”

As for the new recognition, he said with a laugh, “Our relatives are calling to ask if Uncle Irv is going to get rich and famous now.”

Marcus has a wry sense of humor that shows up in his artwork as well as his conversation. It stems, he says, from his Jewish heritage, from comedic Yiddish theater of the early decades of the last century to comedians such as Jack Benny and Fred Allen who appeared on early television of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

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It's apparent in early works like "King and Queen of Household Royalty," 1971, a large painting based on a newspaper photograph of two elderly women holding up their pet cats, one feline in a paper crown, the other squeezed so tightly by its human that its eyes pop out. It continues with subtler and more sophisticated humor in recent works like "Midsummer Night's Dream," 2013, in which an elegant Japanese woman with a long scarf whose texture you can almost feel and a Puck-like comic figure in a fool's cap have tea in a park-like setting with fanciful powder pink and pale blue trees.

A lifelong resister of following the art world's mainstream, Marcus's idiosyncratic approach to color and composition mark him as a divergent thinker, a radical romantic who has followed his own path rigorously since coming to Sacramento from Minneapolis in 1959 to teach at what was then Sacramento State College.

"I was trying to extract myself from Abstract Expressionism," he recalled, "so I worked with innocuous photos, a cute picture of a dog, for example, that...(my wife) Liz cut out of the New York Times."

Soon growing tired of the "sweetness" those works had, he moved to more ambiguous images and adopted a jarring palette, juxtaposing shocking, emotionally affective colors in works like "Call for Bids," 1973. Abandoning local color and moving toward Fauvism, he created an enigmatic image of auctioneers (one with a red face and blue hair holding up a large snake) in strong colors almost violent in their intensity.

Moving into the arena of political history that same year, he hit on what art critic Susan Landauer calls in her catalog essay "the enduring theme of his life's work: the unfortunate and occasionally disastrous consequences of mankind's foolishness."

Departing from the buffoonery of works like "Magoo," an oil pastel of a man in a painfully ridiculous Playboy Bunny outfit, he turns in the large oil "Dead Guerrillas," 1973, to a disturbing image of a spectral firing squad standing behind a bloody mire of slaughtered bodies. Calling up the savagery of Francisco Goya's "The Third of May, 1808," tempered by a cool 20th century irony, it's a seminal early work.

Moving away from news photos later in that decade to perplexing imaginative works, he gives us "Fifty Years Ago," 1979, a scene of female factory workers making tiny men in an interior that mixes industrial overhead pipes with the ruins of Machu Picchu. Similarly strange is the graphite drawing "I Can't Put My Finger On it," 1981, which gives us an image of apartment dwellers in an indoor/outdoor scene that mixes high rises, a smokestack, and a busy city street with a pair of relaxed urbanites reading the papers and partaking of morning tea.

He moves from whimsy to menace in the oil pastels, "Racy Track," 1978, a scene of lovers in a lushly colored living room where tiny race cars zip around a coffee table, and "Crossover," 1979, in which a woman pulls a reluctant child across a field of electrified train tracks the color of blood.

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In the mid-1980s with works such as “Bootleg” and “Expropriated Ballroom,” he experimented with turning photos upside down or sideways to further disrupt, he explained, the viewer’s ability to decipher imagery and invite them to concentrate more on the formal potential of dark and light patterns, textural elements and the varying size of shapes.

These works are challenging and disorienting, forcing the viewer to experience them as baffling but intriguing surreal visions. In the 1990s, Marcus turned to works that concentrated on romance, giving us radiant images like “Private Thoughts,” 1992, in which a sinuous, long-legged woman cradles an orange cat stretched out on her lap, and “Dance of the Snails,” 1999, a scene of ballerinas with small heads in billowing skirts that suggest snail shells and a kneeling male dancer in romantic rose and gold tones.

Veering from disasters like 911 and heroic events like “The Miracle on the Hudson” to romantic scenes like “Hide, Hidden,” 2011, he gives us an image with lush, close-keyed colors that calls up associations with works by Marc Chagall. In it, entwined lovers kiss passionately as a purple horse leaps over their heads.

Harnessing “simultaneous contradictions” (romance and disaster) to enrich his art, as Landauer points out, his works will continue to confound and amaze and resonate in our minds and senses, none more vividly and intriguingly than his 2007 oil, “The Scream.” In this masterwork, an inky, vaporous black defines the legs, bosom and head of a woman who swoons in a blue mood, her head nearly disappearing in the murk, as a ghostly face rises up behind her, warped into something resembling Edvard Munch’s famous icon of modern anxiety “The Scream, 1895.”

Both beautiful and dolorous, the image lingers in the mind, long after you leave the show. It must be noted that the Manetti Shrem Museum’ founding director, Rachel Teagle, did a terrific job of curating and designing the exhibition. These powerful works almost jump off the wall.

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