

Irving Marcus (1929-2021)



Grim Damper, 2012, oil pastel on paper

Irving Marcus, an artist and educator, died in Sacramento on March 2. He was 91. His death, from complications of a heart attack and pneumonia, was announced by Sam Parker, his Los Angeles dealer.

A key figure in the Sacramento art community, Marcus fostered highly influential exchanges between Chicago, San Francisco, Davis and his hometown. In 2018, his work was the subject of a career retrospective at the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis, organized by founding director Rachel Teagle.

Marcus' work aligns with a group of narrative/figurative painters who hit their stride in the 1960s and 1970s: the Chicago Imagists and the Bad Painting group assembled by Marcia Tucker at the Whitney in 1978. Both were precursors to Neo-Expressionism which later held sway in New York during the 1980s.

Marcus, who was raised Jewish in Minneapolis, likened his thematic approach to Yiddish theater, which transformed the "disastrous conditions" faced by European immigrants into "humor and theatrics that were

David M. Roth and Sam Parker, "Irving Marcus (1929-2021)" *SquareCylinder* (March 14, 2021), accessed online.

tragic and funny,” he told an interviewer in 2013. Employing a Fauvist color palette, he created dark psychodramas populated by demons, geishas, beasts and innocents interacting uneasily. “Someone once said my work is somewhere between Chagall and Anselm Kiefer, and that [as a viewer] you’re always being whipped back and forth between cheeriness and anguish.” That dynamic would remain in force throughout Marcus’ career.

Starting in the mid-70s, he began painting from news photos, which he fashioned into intersecting color fields that functioned as multi-planar stages for nebulous (and sometimes nefarious) plots involving humans and animals in urban and rural settings. He rendered them as a caricaturist might, contorting their bodies into anatomically difficult positions, and situating them in equally improbable physical spaces. While Marcus eventually stopped painting directly from news sources, headline events were ever-present in his work, as were, one suspects, dreams and traumatic memories. In a catalog essay for the Manetti Shrem exhibition, critic Mark Van Proyen said as much, likening Marcus’ painting process to the excavation of repressed memory that occurs in psychoanalysis.

Of his use of photos, Van Proyen said, the “paintings move beyond and away from their source images, returning them to the lively and embodied realm of painting rather than enacting a valorizing recapitulation of the original photos...Whereas most photorealist images went to great lengths to naturalize the artificiality of mechanical-image reproduction, Marcus’s paintings from the 1970s did the opposite, emphasizing the photograph’s status as a found object that could be manipulated, distorted, revived, and rearranged like puzzle pieces or shards of stained glass. It is a strategy that would become commonplace when digital image-editing software became widely available, but when Marcus first started working in this direction, it was truly innovative.”

The allegorical content of those paintings, Marcus said, arose organically out of a process that began with oil pastel drawings on paper before being replicated in oil on canvas. “I look for photos that have some sort of power as a visual object,” he explained. “Then I look at them in terms of color. I’m looking at the demands of a particular atmosphere that I’m projecting onto a bit of a photo. If the atmosphere of what I’m looking at is dark, then I have to use dark colors,” and out of that process “images start to appear.”

The resulting “figures and their environments,” wrote the late art historian and curator Susan Landauer (1958-2020) in the Manetti Shrem catalog, “wade so deeply into the realm of fantasy that fact and reality blur to the point of chaotic confusion. It takes time to identify the quasi narratives of these works, which is one of Marcus’ aims; we can never be certain of what we see. These works are like Rorschach tests for both artist and viewer. But one thing seems certain: the overriding theme is pandemonium.”

Irving Marcus was born in 1929 in Minneapolis to Sidney and Edith Marcus who ran a small dry-goods store on the city’s Northside. Marcus received a bachelor’s degree from the University of Minnesota in 1950 and a master’s degree in fine art from the University of Iowa in 1952. Philip Guston, a visiting artist lecturer during that time, was encouraging and supportive of Marcus’ work.

While studying at the University of Iowa, Marcus was drafted into the U.S. Army to fight in the Korean War but was able to postpone his service until he completed his degree. Towards the end of the war, Marcus

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joined the US forces abroad, where he was responsible for establishing communications in the field. In 1954, he began his teaching career in the art department at Oberlin College. The following year, he took a position at the University of Hawaii, Hilo, where he met Liz Machida, who worked in social services. They married in 1957 and moved to Illinois, where Marcus taught for two years at Blackburn College. Marcus joined the faculty at Sacramento State College (now California State University, Sacramento) in 1959 and was eventually promoted to chairman of the art department, and in that position, he made wise choices. One of them, during a tenure that lasted more than 30 years, was recruiting Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson to teach. He was admired by students and peers for his measured wit, encyclopedic knowledge of art history and profound sensitivity to the most subtle relationships of color and tone.

In 1962, his work was included in a wide-ranging annual exhibition of local artists at the Crocker Art Museum, where it caught the eye of Adeliza McHugh, a pioneering gallerist who was about to open the Candy Store Gallery in nearby Folsom. Marcus was among the first artists she approached, and when she visited his studio and she praised his colorful, pastoral oil pastel drawings. She took one, and at the end of the day, she called Marcus to let him know it had been sold and asked for more. Over the next several years, Marcus would serve as a crucial conduit to the Candy Store, introducing McHugh to many artists she would eventually exhibit, including Jack Ogden, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Suzanne Adan and Michael Stevens. (Exhibitions commemorating the Candy Store are slated to appear this summer at the Crocker Art Museum and the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art.)

Marcus was preceded in death by his only child, Carla Susan Marcus, in 2012; his sister, Audrey Jean Marcus Efron, and his nephew, Howard Mark Efron. He is survived by his wife of 64 years, Elizabeth Marcus, his son-in-law, Sean Pepper of San Francisco, and nieces Seiko Machida of Maui, Hawaii; Helen Holden of Los Angeles, and Rochelle Efron Buhr of Tampa, Fla. and the Netherlands; her sons, Collin Buhr and Corbin (Shayna, wife) and grandnephew, Geronimo Buhr.

The Parker Gallery in Los Angeles presented a solo exhibition of Marcus' work in 2019; a second exhibition is scheduled for 2022. His work is included in many permanent collections, including the Crocker Art Museum, de Young Museum, Oakland Museum of California, the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art and the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

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Special thanks to Sam Parker of the Parker Gallery for the much of the biographical information in this article and to the Manetti Shrem Museum for the exhibition catalog from which the above quotes from Mark Van Proyen and Susan Landauer were taken.

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