

A Fanatic for Paint

LENNART ANDERSON, THE LATE AMERICAN FIGURATIVE PAINTER AND TEACHER, GETS SOME WELL-DESERVED ATTENTION AT THE NEW YORK STUDIO SCHOOL. BY JOHN DORFMAN



Lennart Anderson, *Street Scene*, 1961, oil on canvas, 77 x 91 in.

THE PAINTINGS of Lennart Anderson bring to mind, variously, Piero della Francesca, Poussin, Degas, Morandi, Balthus, Fairfield Porter, and ancient Roman frescoes. Some of these were inspirations, while others simply happened to share traits with him, perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not. The essential qualities of Anderson's art are balance, grace, and clarity, and no work of art that has these can be derivative. He also had a combination of self-assurance and

modesty that made it possible to pursue a quietly figurative style in a noisy era of abstraction. The deep and careful thought process evident in his painting made him an excellent teacher, as well, and in his long career at Brooklyn College he educated and inspired many young artists.

"Lennart Anderson: A Retrospective," at the New York Studio School, is the first major exhibition of the artist's work since his death six years ago at the age of 87.



On view from October 18 through November 28, it brings together over 30 paintings spanning six decades. The curators, Graham Nickson (dean of NYSS) and Rachel Rickert (exhibitions coordinator), collaborated with Anderson's estate to secure loans from public and private collections as well as from his dealer, Leigh Morse Fine Arts. Many of the works have not been seen in public for many years. After its run at the NYSS, the exhibition will travel to other venues, including the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts and the Southern Utah Museum of Art. An illustrated catalogue is being published, with essays by art historians

Martica Sawin and Jennifer Samet and painters Susan Jane Walp and Paul Resika.

Growing up in Detroit during the Depression, Anderson never wanted to be anything but a painter. He described himself as a "fanatic" on the subject and recalled, "Anything that was painted interested me. It could be the stupidest calendar art. If it was put down with paint, I would cross the street to see it." His father, a pattern-maker for Ford Motor, could draw well, and one of his compositions, depict-



Clockwise from top left: *Bacchanal*, 1956, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in.; *White House Reflected*, undated, oil on canvas, 18 7/8 x 18 in.; *Buildings, Rome*, 1975, oil on masonite, 7 7/8 x 11 1/4 in.



COLLECTION OF BNY MELLON

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Clockwise from top left: *Portrait of Mrs. Suzy Peterson*, 1959, oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 26 $\frac{11}{16}$ in.; *Still Life with Table*, 1964, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 in.; *Still Life with Yellow Apple, Muffin and Paper Cup*, 1983, oil on canvas, 10 x 16 in.



ing a worker at his bench, made a big impression on his son. The young Anderson educated himself by spending time at the Detroit Museum

and checking art books out of the library and copying from them. After graduating from a technical high school that was a feeder for the automobile companies, he won a scholarship to the school of the Art Institute of Chicago.

After graduating in 1950, he went to the Cranbrook Academy of Art in the Detroit suburbs, which he found more to his liking than the Art Institute. At the time, he was interested in the Expressionists. "When I got to Cranbrook," he recalled, "I decided I would paint like Kokoschka, Soutine, and



Rouault. I painted horrendous subjects—dead babies, trash heaps, prostitutes. I was as innocent as you could be about painting prostitutes!" Soon he got more focused on Rembrandt, to the extent that fellow students were calling him "Little Rembrandt." At Cran-

brook he became friends with Pat Passlof, who introduced him to the art scene in New York when he moved there not long after getting his master's from Cranbrook. Through Passlof and her partner, Milton Resnick, he was exposed to the downtown Bohemia of the New York School; Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline were among his neighbors, and while he would never be an Abstract Expressionist, Anderson held de Kooning's drawing in especially high regard. In 1958 Anderson won a Prix de Rome scholarship and spent three years in Rome, where he found inspiration in ancient Roman art as well as in the work of much later artists like Poussin, who came to Italy to paint.

Poussin's Arcadia-themed works are echoed in Anderson's "Idylls," a series of three large-scale paintings he began in the 1970s and worked on over decades until shortly before his death, and an earlier one, *Bacchanal*, which he made in 1956, shortly before his trip to Rome. In these works, we are transported to a realm that is both fantastical and real, redolent of ancient Greek and Roman myth and yet timeless, in which figures dance joyfully to the accompaniment of musical instruments amid pleasant scenes of nature. Of these, he said to a reporter in 1982, "The idyll should never go out of style. The further we are from an Arcadian scene, the more meaningful it is and we should find ways to paint it. Besides, the subject is not just classical. It is air, flesh and sky, and all the great art

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Nude, 1961-1964, oil on canvas, with frame: 58 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 50 in.



Clockwise from top left: *Idyll IV*, 2021, oil on canvas, 16 x 19 in.; *Seated Nude*, 1963, oil on canvas, 57 x 70 in.; *View of Detroit River*, 1953, oil on canvas, 10 x 14 in.

reserve, and indeed there is a dryness, a coolness to his art that comes partly from his colors. Some of his paintings, especially the still lifes, exhibit crisp, sharply defined technique, while others have a looser, or at least more open, kind of paint handling. In the last 15 years or so of his life, Anderson suffered from macular degeneration, so he had to open up his technique even further in order to be able to paint at all.

Anderson often used broad passages of pastel colors whose slight unreality transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. In his Balthus-esque *Street Scene* (1961), a minor mishap involving a child on the sidewalk becomes a mysterious tableau, a frozen moment. Among the portraits, *Nude* (1961–64) and *Portrait of Mrs. Suzy Peterson* (1959) use backgrounds that are real and yet abstracted enough to allow the figures to emerge with a sort of startling energy. “I’m not particularly interested in ‘realist painting,’ in quotes,” he said. “I’m painting surfaces; I’m painting how things fall

of the past which had those things in it.”

Most of Anderson’s work does not center on a magical, mythical world; it is well-grounded in the everyday, but it endows that everyday reality with a special quality that derives from his sense of proportion, not only geometrical but in terms of taste. The *New York Times* art critic John Canaday once praised Anderson for his

together and separate out.”

Anderson always identified closely with Degas, whom he praised for his “detachment.” He remarked, “Degas is very fragmentary, he’s never finished. There are new things that keep coming up.” In Anderson’s paintings, new things keep coming up, every time one looks at them. 📷



COLLECTION OF THE AMERICAN MACULAR DEGENERATION FOUNDATION; CENTER FOR FIGURATIVE PAINTING; COLLECTION OF THE ESTATE

Helen Frankenthaler 1983

Helen Frankenthaler
November 29, 2021 - North St. Paul, MN



Helen Frankenthaler (American 1928 - 2011)
Untitled - 1983 - Acrylic and Crayon on Paper - 22 1/2" x 30 1/2"

Label on Reverse:
“Gallery One, Toronto, Ont.” & “Andre Emmerich Gallery Inc, New York”

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