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# Irving Marcus: The Defiant Modernist

**P**leasure is a rare commodity in any era, and if any observation can be made regarding Sacramento Valley artist Irving Marcus's narrative and figurative works, pleasure (or self-indulgence) is the particular theme of the many little innuendoes that he has consistently woven into his paintings during the course of his long and rewarding career. Over the years, art critics and historians have tried to place Marcus's work into many categories. The movements or influences most often attributed to his work range from Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Intimism, Abstraction, Abstract Impressionism (and its second generation) to German

Expressionism, Color-Field painting, Bay Area Figurative, Chicago Imagism, Neo-Impressionism and Figurative/Narrative. Every attempt to contain Marcus within any single style has failed, yet his distinctive work certainly suggests qualities drawn part and parcel from this list of "isms," a fact which no doubt delights the artist.

Marcus, who retired from teaching in the art department at the California State University, Sacramento, in 1991, is most fond of referring to himself, anti-fashionably, as a modernist. He imp-



Irving Marcus, (above) *Dance Of The Snails*, 1998, oil and pastel on paper, 16" x 21"; (right) *Kimono Hanger-On*, 1997, oil on canvas, 66" x 44". Below: Irving Marcus in his Sacramento studio, March 1999. (Photo: Larry Dalton.)

ishly grins with pleasure when he says it, endowing this maverick, self-professed distinction with a sort of wry credibility. Marcus's conspicuous distaste for well-worn postmodern classification is a great irony. As he well knows, any artist or artwork created these days is almost automatically placed into the postmodern stewing pot. Marcus resists such labeling, and apparently worries about being tossed into the postmodern pot. If he goes, no doubt it will be dramatically, kicking and screaming all the way.

Postmodernism has its willing and unwilling saints and sacrificial lambs. Figurative/Narrative artist Philip Guston, for example, was eventually volunteered as a member of this debatable category. Certainly Guston—for a short time one of Marcus's teachers while he was an art student at the University of Minnesota, where Ray Parker was another influential instructor—holds something in common with Marcus, at least philosophically. Although postmodern distinctions are applied to most art and artists today without a second thought, the free association of second thoughts has become Marcus's specialty, whereas earlier he traded in a sort of pessimistic beauty. As he notes of his relatively recent move towards kinder, gentler subject matter and personal perspective, "I am at a nicer stage these days, not as caught up in man's inhumanity to man."

Critic Christopher Reed has posited that nihilism is a particularly postmodern manifestation. Another critic, John Fitz Gibbon, first observed a streak of nihilism in Marcus's work in the late 1970s, and reinforced his view twenty years later by suggesting that the artist continues to mask his pessimistic perspective with gorgeous surfaces that belie his philosophical outlook. More than anything, Fitz Gibbon believes, Marcus utilizes color to cover up his real self.

Indeed, Marcus *is* color. His sense of it is blindingly beautiful, often stunning the eyes like a retina burn that lingers long with the viewer and superimposes its contents over the preceding image with an iconic imprint. This experience mirrors itself in multiple occasions, until subject matter appears distorted. Marcus's ideas are formed with brilliant, essential, saturated hues, sometimes to the point of

erasing the outlines and contour elements of representation that distinguish his Figurative/Narrative works. (It should be noted that he is fundamentally more Nar than Fig.)

According to artist James Albertson, associated with the "Bad Painting" group, Marcus is "understated and approachable. He does what he feels is the right thing." While at CSUS, Marcus did the right thing by hiring such notables as Chicago Imagists and members of the Harry Who? movement, Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson, among many others.

A recent visit to Marcus's studio reveals that, following his retirement, he continues to do the right thing in terms of creating bold, accessible, mysteriously enticing works of art. Nestled in the wild yet ordered beauty of his devoted wife Liz's garden is what looks like a converted garage. Upon entering this studio, you immediately notice the operatic, almost dulcet *Dance Of The Snails*, leaning beside the charming and exquisite *Kimono Hanger-On*.

"It strikes me that one should expand the genre one is working in," Marcus notes of his recent work. "I have respect for David Park, Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn. They were modernists, too, in a way, striking off on their own in the face of the East Coast AbEx steamroller. I do not want to disconnect myself from that modernist tradition. I want to maintain a few threads. Actually, I agree with John Fitz Gibbon that my work has become more organic these days."

Perhaps the benevolent, familiar "hanger on" of Marcus's recent *Kimono* painting has decided to inhabit its creator. In any event, an accomplished samurai warrior such as Marcus eventually flowers into a reflective, poetic, lyrical artist—even if it is against his will. Marcus's most recent works unveil themselves like visual haiku, those delicious, poignant ones that only come after years of work, and which are written in celebration of life itself.

—Kimi Julian

Irving Marcus: *Paintings & Drawings* through May 29 at Joseph Chowning Gallery, 1717 17th St, San Francisco.

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