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"Richard Callner: 50 Year Retrospective" and "The Callner Challenge"

The Albany Institute of History and Art captures and chronicles Richard Callner's world of 'magic, poetry and metaphors' in two exhibitions, *Richard Callner: 50 Year Retrospective* and *The Callner Challenge* on view until June 1, 2003.

Richard Callner: 50 Year Retrospective includes 54 major works from 1957 to the present, with more than half the works dating from the past ten years. Callner's work begins with a series of dark monster figures, which emerged from his experiences during the Depression. With the discovery of the Goddess "Lilith" in the early 1960s, Callner embarked on a 10-year journey into the mythological world. By the early 1980s, the mythological figures receded as Callner turned his attention to creating interior and exterior views, still lifes, landscapes and abstractions using his mastery of color, line, and pattern. Also included in the exhibition is a selection of more than 50 prints, drawings and color studies that provide insight into his artistic ideas and working methods.

"*Richard Callner: Fifty-Year Retrospective* is the first one-person exhibition of contemporary art to be featured in the new Albany Institute of History & Art," said Christine Miles, director. "This gives me special pleasure for many reasons, but mostly because Richard Callner so fully epitomizes the Institute's intent to collect and exhibit the work of artists that are part of the artistic and cultural fabric of the region."

The complementary Rice Gallery exhibition, *The Callner Challenge*, focuses on the academic career of Richard Callner that spans almost forty years. Computer images of work in all media by 50 former students and colleagues pay homage to the dynamic heritage of Callner's academic influence.

Callner began his long and distinguished teaching career in 1952 at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana where he remained until 1959. He taught at Olivet College in Olivet, Michigan from 1960-1964. In 1964-1965 Callner taught at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. A year later he moved to Italy for five years and served as the founding director of the Tyler School of Art in Rome. In 1975 Callner came to Albany to head the art department for the State University of New York at Albany, a position he held until 1981. Callner played a pivotal role in the establishment of the university's MFA program in 1983. Callner continued to teach graduate level courses until he retired in 1991.

Callner has an impressive roster of one person and group exhibitions in this country and around the world to his credit. In fact, friends muse that Callner is better known abroad than in the United States. His works are in many prestigious private and public collections including the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia; Museum of Painting and Sculpture, Istanbul; the Gallery of Modern Art, Pristina, Yugoslavia; the Albany Institute of History & Art; The Art Institute of Chicago; The Detroit Institute of Arts; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the New York Public Library; Yale University Art Gallery; Cincinnati Art Museum; Worcester Art Museum; and the University Art Museum, State University of New York at Albany.

Biography

Callner was born on May 18, 1927. Both sets of his grandparents immigrated to the United States from the same small village in Lithuania and settled in the Midwest during the late nineteenth century. When Callner was four years old his parents moved to Chicago, where he spent his early childhood during the Depression living in a working class neighborhood with his brother, Jerry, who became a filmmaker. Big for his age and shy as a child, Callner avoided the street gangs in his neighborhood, and preferred to stay inside and draw.⁴ Callner attributes his early visits to the Field Museum of Natural History as having a strong influence on his early monster paintings. Another favorite museum was the Art Institute of Chicago, where Callner later took drawing classes.

At age 17, Callner dropped out of school and joined the Navy during World War II. His strongest memory from this period is sitting on a ship in the middle of the ocean observing the formation of clouds, the rising and setting of the sun and moon, and most of all the changing weather, an experience that provided ideas for later landscape paintings. After leaving the Navy in 1946, his first formal study of art began in 1946-48 through the G.I. Bill at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, then on the Académie Julian in Paris, and finally to New York City to study at the Art Student's League. In 1952 he was awarded a M.F.A. degree from Columbia University.

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Although Callner began his career as an abstractionist, the earliest mature work included in this retrospective exhibition dates from 1957-1963. His paintings from this period are often described as being on the "edge of the Chicago Monster School" in part because of the imagery of grotesque men, women and animals. Yet Callner's work, with its distinctive palette of muted browns, greens, and gold and richly textured surfaces, is not derived from the same set of regional sensibilities. Callner often refers to these early works as his "Dark Paintings." To create the richly textured surfaces of the early paintings Callner began with a sheet of untempered masonite and painted at least six layers of underpainting white and sanded the surfaces in between. Callner added fine sand or marble dust to give more body to his paint. The textures and dark, rich colors were created by adding a series of glazes to the surface of the painting.

After 10 years of creating dark, somber paintings filled with anger and rage, Callner embraced a new mythological figure he called Lilith, which gave birth to a body of imagery that focused on freedom, humor, independence and an entirely new color palette. According to Callner, the Lilith image "was an amazing creature: beautiful, intelligent, strong and open to change and adventure. She was feminine, independent and irreverent. She also had the ability to invoke and control evil and was a master of transformation." It is important to note that Callner's Lilith is not the Lilith of the Jewish tradition or the Lilith of the feminist movement, but instead Callner, as mythmaker, created his own version of the story of the goddess Lilith for his paintings and combined her with other mythological figures. Technically, this series was a break away from heavy impasto oil to thin direct painting with some glazes. From this point on Callner's paintings were executed with very thin glazes of semi-opaque and translucent glazes of color over a thinly prepared ground of lead white.

During the 1980s Callner's subject matter shifted to include landscapes, interior and exterior views, still lifes, and portraits. These striking new works featured strong colors and extravagant lines and patterns, which created often-distorted perspectives. Until this time, Callner's preferred medium was oil on canvas, but with these new pictures he enthusiastically embraced new materials including a unique overlay of watercolor and gouache on paper which helped him to achieve stunning color combinations that appear to vibrate across the surface of the paintings. Callner favored this new medium because it enabled him to work faster and produce more work.

Callner's distinctive interior rooms are chock full of complex and contradictory perspectives. What may appear at first to be a window overlooking a landscape may also be a painting hanging on the wall or a mirror reflecting another wall. Many of these rooms contain distinctive vases, a selection of fruit or flowers on tabletops covered with patterned cloths, and curtains with tiebacks framing windows. The walls are covered with decorative wallpapers, the floors and ceilings are covered with painted patterns, and multiple tapestries and carpets drape the floors and walls. It is

interesting to note the absence of chairs and figures in these rooms. Callner likes to infer that someone has either just left or is about to enter the space.

Callner's landscape paintings are clearly influenced by time spent in Yugoslavia, Spain, Russia, Japan, Turkey and the Hudson Valley. The ordered fields of Yugoslavia between Novisad and Belgrade stimulated the first landscapes series. The brightly colored stylized lollipop trees marching from hillside to hillside are certainly reminiscent of the enchanting Yugoslavian folk art paintings from this period. Landscapes featuring the distinctive olive orchards near Granada, the hills surrounding Madrid, and the distinctive red Spanish Mountains soon followed suit. Another series includes the bright yellow fields of England. At some point, Callner admits, he began to combine elements from all of these landscapes in his paintings. After years of painting the landscapes of Europe, Callner turned to the waterways and mountains of the Hudson Valley and Adirondacks.

Callner's fascination with water began in the 1990s and brought forth a new and dramatic subject, images of waves, and falling water. Water flows up, down, over, and around in these pictures which employ Callner's characteristic and luxurious accumulation of white upon white dashes and dots and spots to create the illusion of splash and spray of water.

More recently, with his Parkinson's disease progressing steadily, Callner has again, embarked in another direction. His brush strokes are broader, his color fields are larger and his subject matter more abstract. According to Callner, his new work has a "wild and noisy attitude."

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