

## Interview with Israel Hershberg

February 1, 2011

By Larry Groff

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## INTERVIEW WITH ISRAEL HERSHBERG

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Israel Hershberg, photo by [Gil baruch Shani](#)

**Israel Hershberg** was born in 1948 in a Displaced Persons camp in Linz, Austria. In 1949 he emigrated to Israel with his family and in 1958 moved with them to the United States, where he attended the Brooklyn Museum School in New York. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, and his M.F.A. from the State University of New York in Albany. He then taught at the Maryland Institute College of Art and the New York Academy of Art. His awards include: the Sandberg prize for Israel Art, 1991; and the Tel-Aviv Museum Prize for Israel Art, 1997. His work has been exhibited in museums and galleries internationally. He is currently represented by the **Marlborough Gallery in NYC**, which is widely recognized as one of the worlds leading contemporary art dealers. Mr. Hershberg lives and works in Jerusalem and is founder and artistic director of the **Jerusalem Studio School**.

I was fortunate to meet Israel Hershberg this past summer during the Jerusalem Studio School's Master Class in Italy and asked him if he might agree to an interview here at Painting Perceptions, I was delighted when he agreed. We talked via skype and then had the conversation transcribed. It was further edited by Israel Hershberg for greater clarity.

**Larry Groff** *First of all, I just want to say thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to do this interview with me. A lot of people will be able to read this interview and get a great deal of inspiration and information out of it, so I appreciate it, and thanks again.*

*My first question is about your early education as a painter. Was there anything that stands out as a pivotal moment that helped shape who you are today as a painter? Anything that would be of note for someone starting out now?*

**Israel Hershberg** "Now" is a huge conversation. I don't know that we can touch on all the modalities of the "now" but perhaps we can touch on some of them down the line.

I started fairly early. I actually started to study at the Brooklyn Museum Art School while still in high school. Before that, I just drew all the time. I mean, I loved to draw – it was how I spent big portions of my time as a kid and living in New York as I did then provided me with great formative examples of art from antiquity and right up to the present. In addition New York provided some truly singular opportunities to actually meet practicing artists whose work I admired.

As luck would have it, the public high school I attended was for some reason endowed with a relatively sophisticated art department. It was a new school and I was in the first graduating class. It [the art

department] even had its own printmaking studio, which was very unusual. I didn't know of too many high schools that had anything like that, with the exception of these magnet schools like the High School of Music and Art or Art and Design, I guess is what they call them in the States today.

We had an outstanding art department head at this school who brought in teachers fresh out of Pratt, Cooper, SVA and Parsons and for high school seemed to me a cut above art teachers entering public education at that level. They were more than encouraging – I'd say they were intimately involved with my early aspirations to be an artist and I have a great fondness for them to this day.

It was the chairman of that high school art department who told me about the Alliance of Figurative Artists – a meeting of painters and sculptors that gathered every Friday night at the Educational Alliance on East Broadway. That was back in 1967.

These meetings had their start in [Al Leslie's](#) studio and when interest and attendance burgeoned it all moved to the Educational Alliance, as oral tradition would have it.

I was young at the time, around 17, to be attending these meetings but found them incredibly stimulating – everyone there spoke their minds in the most uninhibited terms, you know, there were none of the PC sterilities of public or academic discourse we see today. To me it felt like an art nerd's equivalent of making the rugby team; very rough and tumble. The atmosphere was always charged and combative with passions really out in the frontmost plane and quite often spilling over the top. The older artists who held sway there were some very serious and established personages. Some I greatly admired then and some I do to this day. I was engrossed by these meetings and at times even thrilled to see and hear them go at it full tilt...





"Cow's Tongue #74" 1987-1988. Oil on linen, 152.8 x 105 cm Collection: Israel Museum, Jerusalem Israel

**LG** *What kind of battles? What were they arguing about?*

**IH** I don't know whether you got to read the [foreward](#) I recently wrote for the Prince Street Gallery's 40th anniversary catalog, but I describe there some of the battle lines drawn – and in general this recounting makes for a bit of very formative personal history.

The big divide was roughly made up of followers of Paul Georges and those of Gabriel Laderman, who I think defined the clearest polarities along that divide. And though there were almost always well considered themes assigned to an evening's proceedings, invariably the recurring sub-theme that popped its head with the most persistence revolved around the virtues of a "loose" or expressionistic approach toward representation vs. a more slow, formally restrained or tempered pictorial approach. I admit to not remembering why that distinction was so important then but the content discussed seemed less compelling at times than the expressions of passionate conviction and the holding forth of artists like Paul Georges, Lennart Anderson, Louis Finkelstein, Rosemarie Beck, William Bailey, Phillip Pearlstein, Aristodemus Kaldis, Gabriel Laderman, Paul Resika, or Leland Bell. Not a one of them was dull and not a one of them to my delight, particularly "open-minded". It made for great pyrotechnics!

For a young fellow with artistic ambitions, this was was a treasure trove and it went a long way in shaping what I think to this day. I was like a sponge, open, but my personal biases, my inclinations lay more with an artist like Lennart Anderson who did not attend these meetings on any regular basis. I remember perceiving this to be a kind of admirable aloofness on his part. And never will I forget an early retrospective of Lennart's at Bard College. It was pivotal and shaped my aspirations as a painter deeply.

The Alliance experience I think, went a long way in carving out a position or posture, a mentality, perhaps an ethic that I identified with intensely at this early stage in life, and I was absolutely astounded that the other art students at Pratt, which I attended after high school, arrived with no such thing!

And very pivotal: One of my teachers and dear friend to this day at the Brooklyn Museum School, Francis (Dick) Cunningham, had studied with Edwin Dickinson, an artist whose paintings and drawings really worked my eyes up into a hunger. I'd go look at his work whenever I could and my admiration for it has never waned. I told Dick of my plans to spend time in Wellfleet on Cape Cod with the stated desire of meeting Dickinson. I expected a meeting like this would be somewhat complicated to negotiate, but Dick deftly set it up and at a blink of an eye I set off to Wellfleet.

I did that for a number of summers. I would go there, I'd paint outdoors mostly, sometimes near and around the salt marsh his gray shingle house occupied the edge of, and I'd show him my work. We'd walk to the small studio up the sand dune near the house and we'd talk. I loved that studio! It was full of the objects I recognized from his paintings and drawings. There was also work of his in that room I'd never seen before



recognized from his paintings and drawings. There was also work of his in that room I'd never seen before – I was completely bowled over! He was already quite old and at times he'd drift in and out of coherent conversation but on the whole there was still the impression of a clarity and authority that came from the rigors of a lifetime's experience, the single-minded pursuit of the art of painting. I understood well the auspiciousness of these moments, knew they'd be enshrined in my consciousness as fortuitous and rare. You can bet on it, what receptivity I had was turned way up to full volume. Dickinson was very much a gentleman of another era, charming, dapper, self-conscious, and authentically the strangest human being I'd meet to this day.



"Clupea Sprattus" 1992. Oil on paper mounted on board, 63.2 x 64.7 cm

So back to Pratt. On my first day there I sensed immediately what lay in store. I insisted on being part of the group that was assigned to Lennart Anderson's life drawing class. That class was my sole comfort in what turned out to be a very irritating four year stint. Look, I just wanted to paint and draw but you know how art colleges are. You couldn't even do that then! They put you with industrial design faculty for something they called "3D design". And if that was not enough, there was also "2D design". It was Bauhaus trying to get into my house – it was just awful. The rest with the exception of allies I managed to make from among the faculty, you know, exceptionally sympathetic and protective adjuncts, these fine abstract painters like Ernie Briggs, Ed Dugmore and James Gahagan – it was all a dull, dull affair. Ed, Jim and Ernie just allowed me to

paint at home. One learned very quickly that the adjuncts were for the most part the ones you wanted to hang with, they were the serious artists, and the full-timers, just academics, rather unexceptional artists frankly, who cared mostly about clawing their way up in the system to power, tenure or both. Amazing what faculty exhibitions can reveal...

My experience teaching for ten years at a similarly inclined Baltimore art college somewhat later, just confirmed this early view by hitting it right out of the ball park.

Well, OK, so much for that. I was living in New York, made it my job to just see as much art in museums and galleries as possible, and traveled abroad to the extent that I could afford it.



"Nova" 1991-1992. Oil on paper mounted on wood, 35 x 39.5 cm

**LG** *Did you ever paint abstractly yourself, then, or have you always been ...*

**IH** I did. It all boiled down to exploration and pictorial curiosity for me — based on the notion that painting is in any case in its essence an abstraction. But no question, I am hopelessly seduced by the idea of jamming or processing what I perceive in the concrete world through that mechanism. I have no interest in the 'narrative of narratives' per se or in creating any kind of document. The conviction that painting is the expression of the experience of painting is more potent and urgent then ever.



**LG** *In looking at your work, I see an exploration of formal painting concerns that other great painters, such as Antonio López García, Corot, Morandi, and Edwin Dickinson, to name a few, might have also concerned themselves with. What are some of the more valuable lessons you've learned from artists like these? How would you respond to these kinds of formal issues? Or do you?*

**IH** Yes. These are painters I've definitely looked to, as well as some very significant others.

I discovered Antonio López García in the early 80's, the others you mention are with me far longer. There was a kind of artlessness, a prosaic quality that attracted me in his work for various reasons. Very different than the kind of lyrical attachments I had at that time, but the work compelled me nevertheless in the quality of the long, hard and uncompromising gaze he put to the grinding stone. There was a vulnerable rawness in the gaze set upon an exposed optic nerve, like the piercing pain a bad tooth sets off. This somehow married in my mind with the conditions I also perceived in the environment of the new home we made when we moved to Israel in 1984. It was an unembellished environment further denuded by an unrelenting and almost cruel light. That kind of hard-nosed looking opened for me a way of engaging this new environment.

I think Lopez's influence on me has certainly inscribed itself and continues to inscribe itself, but it feels more residual now. I could never give myself over to that kind of bluntness completely – the detachment yes – but there were too many things I care about that were missing for me in the work. The lyrical eloquence I always saw in Lennart's brush, for one...

You know, what really seduces me besides the perceptual impulse is the primacy of another idea that for a lack of a better word, I'll call encapsulation – the idea that a work of art should be a time capsule in which a painter deposits his most cherished, formative painterly desires – in the Joycean sense, of being forged in the smithy of one's soul – the direct, unmediated experiences and communions we have had with great works of art. Works of art which have imprinted themselves indelibly on the nervous system, coming together, incarnate, as perceptual impulse. I'm not talking about facile quotations, but rather a harnessing and investment of those painterly desires wantonly, intimately and formationally in the conceiving of a work. Morandi and Balthus for me were and are great exemplars of that. In Morandi the whole of the genius of Italian art comes together in an astounding distillation of this idea but with the past's requisite narratives clarified out. In Balthus the engagement is not only intimate, it is encyclopedic and manifold – the Greeks, Romans, Giotto, Piero, Masaccio, the Venetians, Sienese... The idea of existing on both edges of history was and is a state I very much desire to achieve.

And yes, Dickinson without doubt, though there's a kind of romanticism in the big works I do not share. But no question, I see myself as part of an artistic lineage that comes down through him and through the two painters I studied with who were his students.





"The Chameleon" 1997. Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 33 x 26.5 cm

On the strictly emotional level I found a more kindred spirit in Lennart who made much in his work of the very Italian Quattrocento/Cinquecento quality of detachment, the kind of detachment we also see in Degas, Velazquez or the writer Henry James – a kind of impersonality if you will. Just to be clear, this in no way suggests their paintings don't pack an emotional punch. They very much do! You see, among artists like this the emotional punch comes by virtue of the artist leaving himself out of count. He does not obstruct by imposing his own feelings on the matter, rather, he effaces himself before what is an overwhelmingly emotional event. You know, giving way and yielding to awe, and as he is awed, we are in awe.

The art that holds out the greatest attraction for me is poised, dignified, tempered. It eschews the cloying, facile sublimes and straining after effects, the dramatics and emotionalisms, that do nothing but destroy their own object. I have an aversion to these, at least in my work I do.

**LG** *With Dickinson's premier coup type paintings, do you see an emotionality in that, that is ...*

**IH** I very purposely used the word "emotionalism" – I make a distinction, as in the disparities between science and scientism, the real and realism, the isms, you know... But no, I don't see that in them at all, they are very felt and full of awe. The awe that comes from an anxious sense of mortality looming. They are infused with the spirit of a carpe-diem-or-bust urgency that necessitates a summation of experience only the most distilled painterly terms can invoke. This is how, in my words, Dickinson undertook and re-conceived the premier coup. Oh no, they are not at all the ubiquitous, complacent alla-prima oil sketches done by the dabbling leisure-set en plein-air. It would be a mistake to think of them like that. But yes, I see them as more detached than the big extended works we are familiar with. But you know, for years, like a lot of artists, I was mostly attracted to the premier coups. There were certainly aspects that I liked in the big ones – so very many things to admire in them. A certain kind of relationship to a painterly dialect I feel close to – the idea of the big spot which Dickinson managed to synthesize into a whole modus operandi that came from studying with his teacher C. W. Hawthorne. But when I saw the Dreams and Reality show in New York a few years back, and you know, I hadn't seen those big Dickinsons for a long time, I was astounded at just how really good these paintings were.

And yes of course, Corot – what's to say...? Particularly the early Italian work (but not just) figures big-time in my thinking. They've loomed even larger in the last ten or so years. Purity of intent and innocence for me are easily interchangeable with detachment, but it is exceptional...



"Nova 2" 1993. Oil on paper mounted on wood, 62.5 x 82 cm





"A Flask of Water with Two Lemons," 1996. Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 24 x 18 cm

**LG** *In your own work, much of what I've seen, anyway, has been over extended periods of time. They seem like they're really highly resolved, very fine work done over a period of time. I am not familiar with any kind of premier coup work that you've done yourself. Can you speak to that in relation to what we were just talking about?*

**IH** Yes, I've done a lot of premier coup! In the earlier years most of what I did was generally hammered out in one sitting. That's certainly changed over the last 25 years. I can't say honestly that I know why or how this change, this slowing down, came to be. I could easily point to a whole corpus of painterly concerns that now occupy a more forefront plane in my thinking, but I'd never trust that as any kind of definitive answer. Neither would I want to dwell on it. I think I'm still a pretty fast painter but it takes so damn long to get what I'm after.

You know, one reason there are no images of my early work making the rounds is that they are in 35mm film slide form. Scanning and enlarging these tiny images into any format is total grief. The grain on the



rough side of the slide, remember...? That gets magnified along with the image. The results are pitiful and therefore just not part of my archiving activities. That's one reason – the other: I don't really like most of it...

**LG** *So you do them, you just don't show them...*

**IH** No, no, I haven't done a premier coup in a very very long time. Actually I should qualify that, not really true. Almost every painting I start starts as a premier coup really – it's essentially what becomes my underpainting, the context out of which I continue to work. I approach the initial laying in when starting a work in precisely the same way I would a premier coup. I don't start with a ghost of a thing and then work up to the full corporeality of color range and experience I'm after. I start with it! I start with a full bodied paint in large masses that hit at the outset the specificity and large color relationships, laid in with a big brush and run through flat with a palette knife to keep things as open as possible for the longest time possible. I find it very liberating to start this way. Down the line it allows me to take on, unencumbered, many other concerns. I must say, I'm averse to the idea of spending one's time painting just to get things right. I make a strong distinction between finish and completeness and it's just the most dreadful thing imaginable to finish a thing before one completes it. I see this all the time when teaching. I start with that completeness and if in the process I do something that discounts it, the painting, if it has that probity, vomits it out. So in a way the premier coup is still very much there, but eradicated and concealed, like a sinopia.

**LG** *I understand that you do work from observation on site, as well as from other sources such as photographs in the studio. Can you tell us a little bit about your painting process? What thoughts might you have before you start a painting that will take you a long time? Maybe even up to a year or more?*

**IH** Well, I used to be very canonical about the idea of painting strictly from life. That changed with the series of Tree Portraits I started in 1998 and were shown in 2001 at what was my second show at the Marlborough Gallery. I hadn't done landscape in a really long time, and you know, being out in the landscape is very, very different than doing a still life or figure in the stability of your north lit studio. Working in an extended way under such conditions enables, if not creates, certain concerns or preferences that take hold and develop pictorially and ideationally. The way my work evolved during that period and what I was determined to go after in these tree portraits, made it very clear after the first few attempts out in the "nature", that the "nature" of painting, in fact, had come to reassert and restore itself.

A major preoccupation for me at the time was how I go about transubstantiating the sensory quality of surfaces, you know, I mean on the nervous system, the whole range of plastic and tactile values and how they can be transmogrified and re-experienced pictorially. I had found that the stillness of studio work with a north light opened the way to these kinds of contemplations of surface, their substitution in paint.

The cypress trees here not only possess a dark self-contained knotted conoid perplexity; they have a kind of tufted and scraggy foliage that the dust blowing in from the desert sticks to, making them appear almost

petrified when there is no rain to wash them down. I wanted to get that, among other qualities. Look, I think once we get down to saying things in paint beyond the large experience of things and enter into tactilities, the exquisite lie, the artifice of painting makes itself more than just felt, it's inescapably present. Something like this we know we cannot do from observation. We make it up! Maybe where trees have a more predictable repetitious patterned foliage, a case can be made for something registering by painting it from life. But this kind of tactile complexity, well, it would be truly daffy to pretend one were painting that from life. That gap in time and space between perception, memory [the short and long of it in the painterly process] restores us, I think, to the artifice of it all.



Detail from "Cypress, City's Edge"

I'd bring these premier coups into the studio and completely based on the color context I established in the nature, proceeded to invent that scraggy foliage as best I could. The primary and secondary plane breaks I needed were down to suggest how I'd go about it. In doing that, however, I saw immediately the dangers of systemization taking over. I'd paint at the start as I'm usually wont to do, with my right hand. But when I got to the tufted foliage, I switched to my left hand with which I could perhaps control "where" I put something but not "how". I didn't want the trees to look like they came out of a one-time formula for tree-making – do you know what I mean? My interest was to maintain the empiric quality of what I nailed down in the nature and weave that into what I was intent on contriving. There's nothing new in any of this! Vermeer, Velazquez, Corot, Morandi all did this in varying aggregates and summations. And each painter



working perceptually reveals, I think, his or her construct of this dichotomy unknowingly, unpredictably, individually. I think it's bad to reconcile, as we have it today, in a highly academized and theorized art world, this apparent contradiction. Painting's best when it's born of this dichotomy.

If we can revisit now the idea of the time-capsule I spoke about earlier. That inner treasury, if you remember, what we "forge in the smithy of our souls", as not only another layer or lens via which we peer, but as a civilizing layer, then the whole question of what makes for a stimulus or impetus for putting things down in paint becomes a very open matter. Everything and all on this strata, of painting as desire, is or can be nature. A photograph too. It – a photo, an illustration, a movie still, another's painting, drawing or sculpture, can inform a painting but it cannot define it.

With all that said, for me, the most succinct color sketch or barest color notation done in the nature, will decisively and comprehensively impact what I do more than anything else.



"Cypress, City's Edge" 2000. Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 21.3 x 26.7 cm

**LG** *So when you're painting from a photograph, you're able to access your response to other art as kind of your primary reason for making the painting, of the continuum of the art process ...*

**IH** Yes, like in a Degas or Vermeer, the photograph can inform, as I said – it does not define. And to clarify, neither does any subject, narrative or object before us define, they inform. The moment it is put through that lens, those civilizing layers, and abstracted into motif, every impetus comes under the sway, the imperative of the painterly impulse. You know, there are things external and internal to the formation of all





"Tree-Oh" 2001. Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 21.8 x 23 cm

**LG** The [Wikipedia page](#) about you states that you believe for a true painter, "reality is a continual feast, a never ending delight to the eyes". However, despite the infinite possible number of subjects, many painters confuse beauty with picturesque subject matter or kitsch, even when this might not be their conscious intention, and are just responding to something that visually moves them.

*One thing I heard you say this past summer that really stood out to me is that ...*

**IH** Wait a minute. That's on my Wikipedia page? I've never seen it. But where is that from? When did I say that?

**LG** It didn't say. I just read it. I thought Oh, that sounds great. I can send it to you. If you just look at your Wikipedia page, you'll ...

**IH** One second. One second...

**IH** ... I have no idea when I said this and in what context but I see here it makes reference to that quote by Albert York I find so moving. Wait... Yes, I have it right here: In this, the only interview he ever granted, York is running himself down, saying, if memory serves, that with the exception of one panel, he liked little else of all he has done.

It's the interview in the *New Yorker* with Calvin Tomkins. Artist Unknown, The New Yorker, June 19th 1995 ([link to the full New Yorker article about Albert York](#))

Tomkins writes: I decided to ask him [York] the impossible question: Why do you paint? "I knew this was going to be difficult," he said, sighing. He put his cigarette out, slowly, and looked at the table. "I think we live in a paradise," he said, "this is a Garden of Eden, really it is. It might be the only paradise we ever know, and it's just so beautiful, with the trees and everything here, and you feel you want to paint it. Put it into a design. That's all I can say. It's been a rather trying business, this painting."

I've read that to my students, and I'll tell you, every time I do, I get choked up. I mean, you hear him say this, then marry it to those small humble paintings, so self-effacing and awed by the most quotidian slices of human life. This was paradise to him? These little panels of trees, a jar of flowers, a cow, two women on a picnic, a woman in a garden with her hand on a tree are miracles to behold in paradise? Yes they are. And I sure would like know where the gathering waters of this man's baptism are hidden... I admire him greatly.

**LG** *Let me continue further with this... One thing I heard you say this past summer that really stood out for me, that painters who seek out industrial-type subject matter, thinking that they will avoid kitsch by doing so, are just fooling themselves. Do you mean by this that what the painter selects to paint from in nature shouldn't necessarily be the true subject, and the reason behind the painting; that the real subject should be the painting itself. I'd like you to speak more about this issue of kitsch and perceptual painting.*



"Aria Umbra" 2003-2005. Oil on linen, 199 x 250 cm



**IH** Well, You know, Italy is so picturesque it's dangerous! Choosing to paint an industrial complex in Italy as a way of skirting the dangers of kitsch is really just another form of sentimentality. Decisions far more integral to the act of painting must be taken up. I make a distinction between the picturesque and the pictorial – oceans separate them. One treads carefully with how and where subject-matter is prioritized in the formational scheme of things when setting about a work. If it's in the forward plane, you're sunk. Great works of art are distinguished by transcendent qualities, their quality of rising above the subjects depicted. All subjects are kitsch, or can be really, and if there are subjects current fashions sanction, be assured time will render them super-kitsch in short shrift. I despise "camp" even more because it's just sophistry disguised as kitsch.



Edgar Degas. Portrait of Thérèse de Gas (the Artist's Sister) 1858-1860 Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

Recently I've been sending my students to look at and make drawings after Degas' painting of Thérèse de Gas. This is a remarkable and amazingly instructive early portrait he did of his sister that hangs at the Musée d'Orsay.



Looking at it through an eye lacking the prism of a pictorial intellect, I imagine one would find this picture ridiculously funny. Here is Thérèse decked out in what I'm sure was the haute couture of her day. She stands concealed in layered wraps of bourgeois modesty, hair in a pompadour atop which is a flower. A bonnet is atop this coiffure beset by a huge pink ribbon tied into a big bow tucked tightly under the chin and whose two hanging ribbon-ends fall at the level of her hips. I mean, this part of the arrangement looks like it should be some kind of medallion they stick to a side of beef! Then there's the huge black shawl with a transparently laced border along the bottom extending down the front below the knees, and under all this, is the fluffiest bell-shaped full skirt that must surely touch the floor.

Looking at this is not too dissimilar to those cringe-inducing experiences we have of looking at old snapshots of ourselves, perhaps as unbearably goofy and vain teens, and you're agasp thinking: oh my God, the pimples and braces are the best part of this!

Yet there is nothing at all ridiculous in this portrait of Thérèse! It's in fact dead serious because every one of these accoutrements has been made severely elemental, molded into an abstracted geometry by the most ingenious pictorial intellect. The possibility for sentiment is here confined by a severe formal scheme, a construct that leaves no doubt as to its purpose – it is completely in the service of this picture! Remove, no, just shift, one element in this teleological construct, and there will be nothing left of it.

Look, we are most certainly products of our own time and environment, but to transcend in art time-bound sentimentalities, one must grasp this.



"Penumbrian Bowl" 2003-2005. Oil on linen mounted on wood, 25.5 x 35.7 cm

**LG** *Do you think that we're losing the language of painting? I'm able to see more painting being done now than I remember from twenty or thirty years ago. Because of the Internet, it's become a popular pursuit for many people for a variety of reasons ...*

**IH** Painting?

**LG** *Painting. But the painting is about something else. I think that people are losing the language of painting, and it's more about the imagery. People don't even actually see the paintings a lot of times. It's just images of paintings. So it's changing the whole way people think about art, and not in a particularly positive way, especially when people want to learn to sell it, they're selling it to people who don't really know anything about art. Obviously, there's no solution really. I'm curious if you've thought about this much?*

**IH** I have, and unfortunately I think this is correct. I'm reminded of a discussion I once had with a rabbinic scholar. We were discussing "belief". He asserted astonishingly, that belief, on a certain pedestrian level, no longer exists. Instead he said, people just believe in belief.

I'm thinking of this new denomination of zealous, born-again promotion-driven artists, these products of atelier schools, the so-called New Realists, or whatever one calls them... Unsurprisingly, in a world where the language of painting has been so greatly eclipsed, the attention they are attracting goes beyond the predictable precincts. This new benighted Brotherhood is for the most part, unabashedly revivalist, with penchants and allegiances to Bouguereau, Cabanel, Couture, Makart, the blandishments of L'art Pompier, Pre-Raphaelism – that part of human history's acknowledged artistic nadirs.

It should not surprise that this is so. It is upon close examination, the very mirror image of the exploitive art world establishment we see when peering out that has mired itself in mercantilism, cynicism and novelty. And really no surprise that the celebrities I mentioned of L'art Pompier comprised some of Andy Warhol's many favorite things – he collected this stuff.

This is not "being into painting"! It's being into an ignorant and sentimentalized idea about painting that the informational nature of learning today, along with educational and museological institutions, are in great part fostering. It's absolutely appalling! I know, I know: there is the seeming irony, which I assure you is not lost on me, of one that has always championed the transmission of classical values, sounding like some kind of Umberto Boccioni in the Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting deriding the nude as nauseous and tedious. Or proclaiming that "bituminous tints" and "the ideal" put to the purpose of obtaining the patinas of time should be banned! Well OK, maybe bituminous tints..., but I hardly think that those who know me, friend or foe, who know my work or the school I founded, could possibly accuse me of ranting that. This said and without shilly-shally, the trend in my view is alarming. It in no way represents the ascendant qualities of the art of painting, it represents the precise opposite, its decline.





Fratta Todina From Afar I, 2003, oil on linen mounted on wood, 5 1/2 x 10 1/4 in., 14 x 26 cm

The other part of your question, basically, are we seeing with a full deck? Do we see all that painting or sculpture has the power to deliver or has that too been reduced to "image"?

We live in a very diminished world visually. We're being conditioned by all sorts of images: photographs, computer generated images you know, media. When reared on this, there's little question: by the time a youngster makes it to the museum, if ever, and sets his eyes on Velazquez's Las Meninas – I mean his eyes – it is highly doubtful he or she will have the necessary brain cells to see abundantly what that astounding work can hold out beyond the shallowness that the pixel dimensions their computer screen, mind you, a substantial improvement over offset reproduction, currently has.

I have recently come across an interesting study sent to me by my daughter-in-law's father, a leading psychiatrist, which appeared in the Journal of Neuroscience, that has confirmed much about what artists and musicians have always known intuitively. The study reports on the development of cortical plasticity in the human brain induced by musical training. Now, cortical plasticity refers to the brain's ability to form or add new cells and connections while also strengthening those connections through enacting, execution or experience. The plasticity here refers to the brain's malleability, take note, throughout a person's life. This vitiates the idea that the brain does not change past a "critical period" in infancy.

Anyway, there were two groups researched: one group actually learned how to play a musical sequence on the piano, whereas the other group just listened to the sequence and, again take note, made critiques! Using magnetoencephalographic measurements, the authors found some astounding group differences. In particular, greater plasticity was found in the auditory cortex of the group that actually played the piano sequence versus the group that just listened and engaged it solely on the cerebral level. This is important: we're talking enhanced auditory representations in the brain as a direct result of practice or execution over what is gained from passive listening and critique. The operative conclusion then is that it is the animal experience which augments capability and understanding – use it or lose it!



"Fratta Todina From Afar," 2005 – 2006. Oil on linen mounted on wood, 23.1 x 26.2 cm

On the other end of this litany and no less worrisome: I have now over a lifetime, watched as schools and university art departments, individually, universally, and with inscrutable callousness, go about the business of pulling the plug on an idea that has inscribed itself in the memetics of our intellectual history, on the artist's individual and collective sensorium – what Louis Finkelstein aptly coined as the centrality of "sustained physical contact" or the "animal experience", where the hard-core study of art is to be pursued.

The new sanitized and theorized model for art studies is by now everywhere ensconced and pervasive. As I see it, artists have been made servile to the needs of the academy and are now producing work shackled, reduced and parochial in its language as that of the academy and its new syndicate institutions – museums, the market place and the media – to benefit their mutual sustenance. OK I can hear the howls and hisses rolling in from certain quarters and the protestations. I hear the oft-raised question once more: How is this different than any other era or different than the church? Well, there's a titanic difference: the church sought to leverage pictorial language to advance and impose its particular message on our culture. The new church, Academe, seeks to actually supplant that language.





"Tel Kakun" 2005-2007. Oil on linen, 250 x 68 cm

I do have a great admiration for institutions of higher learning within parameters. It is their nature and the nature of academic disciplines to foster movement starting with theory, then practice, to product and back. What they've done by applying this to the plastic arts, the ravages they've wrought, the alterations beyond all recognition, is an unmitigated disaster. The flow of lifeblood, of moving from practice to knowledge, from process to proposition in the perpetual stream of the artistic creative process, the understanding that in reversing this vital, vascular essence, in moving it backwards from proposition to process, from knowledge to practice, has become the kiss of death to developing young artists. And who are the people doing the kissing? It's those who age, advance and ossify in these schools and departments, who have attained positions of authority and power within them, who don't know the difference between a sow's butt-hole and a truffle when it comes to the "making" of art or of learning something for your eyes or your hands, that have foisted and fostered this ruinous new order on the study of art.

When invited as a guest critic to various institutions over recent years, I have, I kid you not, walked into studios where students actually put their work out of sight and attempted to engage me, before all else, into "what" they are "trying to do". Needless to say, I would have nothing of that and told them to turn their work around. How sad! But the fact is, they are not at fault, it's precisely what they've been taught! And that you see art students today who sound, look and smell far more like MBA students rather than bemused art students, should also not surprise.



"C-Spot- Papigno," 2005-2006, oil on linen mounted on wood, 20.3 x 26.5 cm

How far have things gone? Here's something that really gets my animus up and is now quite the common practice. I'm talking about bringing in functioning or perhaps former museum curators – makes no difference which – ostensibly invested to become factors, if not lead actors, in that most sensitive and formative cauldron of artistic intercourse, I mean the studio and its unique metaphysics of practice, discourse and critique. Is this not the grossest intrusion on the preserve and domain that belongs to making, of learning for the eye, and of learning for the hand? The studio is an arena where whole cosms and systems of plastic and pictorial experience must by their very nature be transmitted in the language of their own conception. That these extracurricular mediators are inserted into this ecosystem, where the most incidental gestures, silent pauses or demonstration can reveal more than whole libraries are able to contain, is an intrusion outrageous in the scope of its denseness and is ultimately crippling. I've heard of these invitations extended to high-profile art dealers as well. And all this not just as playful or experimental divergence – which is appalling enough. It has become a permanent fixture, a main component in shaping on a rudimental level an art students' weltanschauung. Mind you, I'm not talking courses in Critical Studies, Contemporary Trends or Ten Easy Steps to an Inflated Self Image and Early Self Promotion. In all seriousness, what we are seeing is the substitution of the critical process over that of the creative one. On the more prosaic level, it corrupts to the nub a student's ability to develop outside of, or rise above a promotional apparatus based on the vagaries of fashion and the banalities of the market-place.

In 2002 there was a revealing article, also by Calvin Tomkins in the New Yorker, about Ellen Phelan's attempt at building from scratch a studio art program at Harvard in which she, a serious artist, wildly succeeded in doing beyond Harvard's expectations. This is a very bizarre tale of misbegotten sequences and convoluted events based on that success, which finally led to her dismissal. But not just her dismissal. It



was also her immediate replacement with a Shakespearean scholar from Harvard's English department who they had assume the chair in her stead. I repeat, to lead a studio-painting program! I'm still trying to figure out who in hell the winners and losers in this theater of the absurd are! It is unfortunate that the article did not go far beyond Ms. Phalen's personal narrative and delve more into the symptomatic, systemic nature of this folly.

Be that as it may, to think that the choices out there today are between these highly academized environments on one-hand and atelier schools on the other, is very dispiriting. What's more dispiriting, however, is that we've reached a point where only the few know to be despondent!



"Aria Umbra II" 2007-2009. Oil on linen, 93 x 250.5 cm

**LG** *You founded the Jerusalem Studio School in 1998 which not only pioneered figurative art training in Israel but went on to become one of the top painting and drawing programs in the world. You offer a rigorous course of study that gives the student a firm foundation in the tradition of great painting from the past as well as the present.*

With all you stated about college-based painting programs putting the emphasis on theory and conceptual matters on the one hand, and on the other academic ateliers teaching the craft of painting in a formulaic and sentimentalized manner, with this in mind, what advice would you give today's students, who are looking for the best possible education to prepare them for being a figurative painter?

**IH** That's really a tough one. There are still some very fine painters and sculptors out there today and some are teaching in colleges. Look, even when I was a student we would, at least the serious folks I knew, first identify who the "artist" was we wished to study with and then make a choice of school based on that rather than any school's reputation. To do that today is quite a different story I'm afraid. What we are talking about now is a far more intrusive academic environment, far more monolithic and inflexible than one would have ever imagined would be levied, or should it be, leveled, on the fundamentally subversive natures of artists and art students. In doing that today both the artist/instructor and the student would find it difficult to shake free the pervasiveness of the academic environment and its grand inquisitors.

I think we need to face it honestly. If it's a degree one is after I suppose one can always make the best of a bad situation. But for that most precious, formative period to have been so adulterated, be assured, cannot be mitigated. And if a degree is not an issue, one is not much better off because good 'academically unattached' art schools are rare and my opinions on atelier schools you by now know.

There are in all fairness a few university art departments left that are certainly exceptions to what I've described. Indiana or New Hampshire, distinguish themselves, I think. However, as a great believer in the importance of being in a state of "sustained physical contact" with great works of art, meaning museums, galleries, looking, copying etc., I'm loath to send students, especially from Israel where the paucity of great collections constitutes a propaedeutic disaster-zone, to study somewhere out in the hinterlands.



**LG** *Do you think students can truly learn to paint on their own through self-study, workshops, things like that ...*

**IH** Wish I could offer more solace, but no, I do not. In a world where visual culture has been so eclipsed and muted, where pictorial language is no longer a lingua franca, one cannot learn this on their own. Courbet, an exception in his own day, would now be quite impossible. And workshops are just not sustained and convergent enough as experiences to make a substantial difference. Something more immersive and comprehensive needs to be in place to take up the slack, to illuminate the darkened zones.

Look, The Jerusalem Studio School has drawn some very fine people from around the world. The Master Class of gifted students and a seriously focused and distinguished visiting faculty that made their way here, have defined this school in great measure. But not everyone makes it to Jerusalem.





"Todi From Afar", 2009, oil on linen mounted on wood, 8 3/4 x 15 3/4 in., 22.2 x 40 cm

Over the years there have been entreaties from various quarters to open specifically our very intense Italy program to outside students and make the ethos of direct unmediated experience which defines this school more widely available. For a number of years and for various reasons and affiliations this was not possible, but as of last year all that has changed and I'll get into that in a moment...

A short while after moving to Israel in 1984, I signed on with the Marlborough Gallery and was for eleven years basking in the radiance of never having to teach again. Frankly, teaching was never an ambition of mine. In any case, I had come to a place where any kind of engagement or complex dialogue with the art of the past, the idea that all history is modern history, was anathema. There was not an art school or artist here that have ever drawn a taught line of engagement with the art of antiquity – it was a place completely devoid of artistic memory. There are understandable reasons for this and there is the weight of other memories, certainly, but this is a complex subject for another time, another forum, and with a good anthropologist by my side. The exception was Avigdor Arikha who sadly passed away a few months ago. However, Avigdor's artistic journey, his transformation, really began in Paris which he made his home, and was set off specifically after seeing a major Caravaggio exhibition at the Louvre in the mid-sixties that caused him to develop as he said, "a hunger of the Eye". That said, there was no way I could possibly live in a place like this, so I decided to change it, if only to begin to.

The Jerusalem Studio School was founded after it became clear to me that there was a group of young, hungry-in-the-eye artists who grew around the work I was doing, and with some prodding from them and the then director of the Israel Museum, Martin Weyl, I decided to establish a school on condition that it embody the values that are the precise polar opposites of the litanous soliloquy I've just subjected you to.



The school was designed to compensate, particularly as Israel is concerned, for the dearth of significant collections needed to generate artistic archetypes in developing art students' minds, as mentioned. The Master Class, the core component of the School, is an intensive, immersive, incubator-like studio environment that's designed to prod, through drawing and painting, with due emphasis on perception and the human form on a daily basis, the germination of what can become an unadulterated pictorial intelligence. This roughly comprises the school's imprimatur of sustained physical contact during the first two years of study. In the third and fourth years this imprimatur is phased into ambitious pictorial research based on copying, transcription, variation and adaptation. There are no Art History 101 courses at the school – no courses "about" anything. The poly-referential historical scope of the studio itself is set up to actualize the integration of art history on the most intimate level. It becomes very clear and at the very outset, that a student cannot possibly proceed in the making of their drawings or paintings, without placing themselves smack into the nexus of that history.

Certainly the school's pedagogical culture, the hall of museum-quality plaster casts, and our distinguished bill of visiting artists, make for great resources and catalyzers. But, the game changer, the most profoundly altering component is our Italy summer program at the Certosa di Pontignano just outside of Siena. It is peerless. In my view, it is from within this kind of very immersive, alternative experience, that the art student with an ambition of being a painter or a sculptor, can take up that slack or illuminate those dark zones I was just referring to.



This Italy program incorporates that pedagogical culture of the JSS Master Class, and plunges it into the sensual root and sap of the western world's artistic heart. Italy is the place where so much converges to imprint upon the artist's nervous system, and as in no other place. The landscape, hill towns, architecture, frescos, churches, monuments, museums, artifacts and light converge into an integrated comprehensive experience of art and life that exists nowhere else. The sheer quality and quantity of it dwarfs all that comprises the Western world's museums combined. It nourishes a lifetime.



**LG** *I believe it. That was also my experience being at your Certosa program, I understand you're having another program this summer. Do you have anything specific planned yet?*

**IH** We have just announced [this year's program](#). It will again be at the breathtaking and humane Certosa di Pontignano. We have not as yet announced our guest of honor this year. Last year as you know, it was our privilege to have Lennart Anderson with us.

**LG** *The trips will be the same places as last time?*

**IH** We are adding Napoli and the Pompeii frescos and artifacts to our existing mix of field trips to Rome, Arezzo, Sansepolcro, Urbino, Florence, Assisi, Perugia and Bologna. And of course Siena is just 7 kilometers

away and a constant resource – an extraordinary city of art. You know, each one of these places just knocks your socks off. Cumulatively it's all staggering and takes a good while to put your mind around.

This past summer I've walked for the umpteenth time into the Brancacci Chapel and the San Francesco in Arezzo for example. It was like I've never seen any of this before – I was floored. One never gets enough of it.

Oh, and almost forgot! We are, I hope, in the final process of accrediting the program.

You know, the experience is so intense and so transformational. I can't tell you how many times we've heard: I've learned more here in two weeks than I have in four years of art school. We hear that all the time. And it is this kind of immersive, comprehensive and convergent experience that can go a long way in ameliorating the sad state you've so generously allowed me to hammer away at.

**LG** *My experience at the Certosa last summer was a profound experience and opened up whole new directions for my work. I strongly recommend your Italy summer program to any serious painter. Thank you again for your enormous generosity in sharing your ideas and experience with us.*

Images of Israel Hershberg's work – courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, NY