

ARTS NEWS

MALDEN NATIVE SON A BRILLIANT IMPROVISATIONAL LANDSCAPE ARTIST



Estombar, 2002

When you stumble on a local link to twentieth-century art history, you praise the power of the internet, thank the stars for your contacts, and set down to checking it out.

A student of Jason Berger's sent me an "as-a-matter-of-fact" email about the artist's birthplace: Malden, Massachusetts. When I read the CV of the founder of the Direct Vision movement, an MFA School graduate who studied in post-war Paris when Matisse, Bonnard, Dufy, and Picasso were all in Europe, my mouth dropped open.

Awarded the Grand Prize of the 1955 Boston Arts Festival, a great annual event in the Boston Public Garden that was revived in 2003 after a hiatus of several years, Berger went on to earn many other honors. He received two traveling fellowships from the Museum School and a faculty research fellowship from the State University of New York at Buffalo. He has exhibited widely, including at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Library of Congress in Washington, the Institute of Contemporary Art here in Boston and the Art Institute of Chicago. He is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and Rockefeller Center in New York, Brandeis University, and Smith College, among others.

EARLY LIFE AND TRAINING

Born to Jewish parents on January 22, 1924, Berger spoke only Yiddish until he was 3. This set him up for anti-Semitic bullying and hindered interaction with the wider world, so the boy was taught English. The family then moved to Glendale Square in Everett, although Berger attended school in Malden. In his biography, he recalled fighting his way home from school or finding other ways to avoid trouble after class was through.

Berger has said that two important elements supported his future career as an artist: his mother's encouragement and the precedent of having an artist in the family. His uncle Jack Savel, graphic artist for the Boston Post, would draw for him during family visits. In that era, newspaper graphic artists would actually create compositions using models to illustrate articles, placing an entirely different and rigorous set of demands on the artist's skills. (Imagine a battle scene from Fallujah drawn with local models posed in combat.)

Early exposure to the MFA collection strengthened the foundation for later direction. At the age of 10, he was tracing Dick Tracey cartoons. By 13, he had begun to paint plein aire landscapes, an approach in vogue in the Newbury Street galleries showing watercolors painted at one sitting by Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent. He has continued to love and favor plein aire painting, although he does work in the studio on what he calls his flat, or studio pieces, compositions with shapes reduced to their simplest forms.

In puberty, he showed an artistic as well as a physical growth spurt, and developed a wide technical body of knowledge. "I haunted the BPL reading everything I could possibly find on painting," Berger once wrote. He "tried out all the recipes" for skin tone and watercolors that his reading referenced. And he applied them, in all the locales and motifs he discovered in Boston, and near home, which was now Roxbury.

Even from this early age, it was evident that one of his greatest gifts was composition. "The real problem in planning a picture is having some sense of how to relate what's there to the frame and make it inevitable, natural, and expressive. Berger always had an instinct for that sort of thing," his Museum School classmate Reed Kay once commented.

Berger's early art education was formalized by Vocational Art Classes at the Museum School for selected Boston high school students that aimed to increase opportunities for immigrant children. (Malden might consider a 21st century equivalent partnership with the Museum School.) The program's name belied its rigor, especially for young artists of high school age. Classically oriented, it required doing challenging drawings from plaster sculpture casts lit from above yet darkened by dust, with the net effect of having more light but darker color at the top of a figure. Students were also required to copy a design element they observed at the museum, as well as render a watercolor of an object found in the museum collection. Finally, they would do a drawing from imagination, then enlarge it.

"We also spent hours and hours copying...Peruvian textiles...and Persian rugs, etc., each with different kinds of color accords. It was not a question of what color goes with another. It was an entire philosophy of color: What makes color vibrate and how can you achieve certain effects through color." Clearly, the work he did with coloration had the most lasting impact, evident as you study his body of work.

Experienced and sophisticated by age 17 with media, composition, and technique, especially outdoor landscape, Berger moved on to the MFA School with ease – it was not trial by fire, it was a natural step. Readers may be interested to compare the \$350 tuition of 1941 with present-day today's \$23,850 price tag.

There he met one of the seminal influences on his later development, his teacher and mentor, artist Karl Zerbe, who, Berger feels, "opened Boston up to all modern means of expression." The Museum School mounted three exhibits of the German expressionists in Boston in the 1940's, during Zerbe's tenure there. Zerbe himself had fled Nazi persecution, so it's logical he would spread their influence to his students and the Boston art community. The impact on Berger is clear: I saw an Ernst Kirchner landscape that Berger might almost have painted, and Kirchner was Zerbe's favorite among the German expressionists. Other influences on him were Nolde, Kokoschka, and Max Beckmann. "I have a picture of Max Beckmann with his arm around me," he boasted, in a phone conversation I had with him from his home in France.

Yet Berger's paintings were, and are, quite different from the German expressionists who influenced him so heavily during art school. His work is happy and celebratory. For example, while Berger uses black for emphasis and boldness, the German expressionists used black because their hearts were broken by two world wars and Nazi persecution.

While World War II ravaged Europe, Berger continued his education at the Museum School. "A fantastic *esprit de corp* existed in my first year of art school, with the students singing a capella as they painted," he recalled in his biography.

These good times were interrupted when Berger was drafted in 1943 and served until 1945. The fact that Yiddish was his mother tongue may have saved his life, Berger once speculated. The Army denied his request to learn a foreign language, since Yiddish was considered his first one. Learning French or German might have put him right in the line of fire. Once in Europe, though he saw no combat, he miraculously survived a serious train wreck in St. Valery-en-Caux.

After discharge, Berger returned to the Museum School. Upon graduation, he received a traveling fellowship to live and work in Europe. In 1949, he and his first wife Marilyn Powers, a classmate of his at art school, left for France, subsidized by the GI Bill. They chose to live in Normandy, where Berger lives today. Until 1994, he lived in Brookline, spending his summers in Europe.

During the traveling fellowship, Berger studied with the second of his most significant teachers – the cubist sculpture Ossip Zadkine. Erudite and wide-ranging in his discussions, Zadkine's most important lessons were in pedagogy – that "showing students the way is better than talking for hours."

A PAINTER'S PAINTER

While he has taught art at certain times in his life, including semesters at the Museum School, Mt. Holyoke, and

Wellesley, as well as a summer school in France from 1983-1986, what he does is – paint. David Aronson, well-known abstract expressionist and contemporary of Berger's who founded the BU Fine Art Department, once noted that Berger didn't choose to be an artist, "he never even had to think about it. He was one when he was born."

With Marilyn Powers, Berger founded the Direct Vision movement in the seventies, based on plein aire painting of scenes with very rapid brush strokes to capture the emotional impact of the scene on the artist. Like the abstract expressionists, Direct Vision emphasizes the act of creation and can produce very abstract images. Unlike abstract expressionism, the final painting, though it may be abstract to greater or lesser degree, is based on what the artist paints from nature. A perfect example is the cover of the catalogue from Berger's latest exhibition in Lisbon, an enlargement of a detail from "Boatyard at Edam," 2005. This enlargement, with its red and orange motif, could easily have been design elements from an abstract expressionist painting.

His work today, he wrote, is "a combination of what I learned from Modernism, Cubism, Fauvism, etc, and later, the paintings of Constable." Each painting, Berger told me, is based on a motif he has looked at for a long time. How he paints the motif "changes with what I ate for breakfast." That is, how he feels at the moment. He also has certain idealized compositions in his mind. He might transpose what he sees before him to fit into these "utopian compositions." The end result is how the image feels to him when he paints it.

He loves the analogy of his work to jazz – to bebop. I noticed that he often has two paintings of the same motif – coloration, line, other elements will be different, yet you know the composition is the same. This is what the jazz player does - the "motif" is a tune he has learned well through the years.

In addition to the plein aire scenes there are studio paintings, which are landscapes from memory that reduce forms to their simplest shapes and flatten out nature's roundness, steamrolling it into two-dimensionality. These paintings also exploit whatever coloration possibilities Berger may feel at the moment, like the red trees, pink paths and black gestures of swans in the "Boston Public Garden," 2002; the gold earth, powder blue walls, cherry red chimneys and green blue skies of "Factories, Mexilmoiera, Looking Towards Portimao," 1992; the blacks, vermilions and violets of "Praia da Rocha" (no date) or the blocks of primary color in "Abstract Harbor" (no date).

With rare exception, he doesn't paint portraits. "My wife, Marilyn Powers, was a portrait painter, and I left that to her." Powers, co-founder of the New Vision movement and Berger's soul mate, had a style quite similar to his. "Besides," Berger noted, "with a landscape, they can never tell you that the nose is wrong."

The accidental discovery of Berger's work was a great pleasure. The pow vibrancy of his colors, the motion in his landscapes, the joyful impatience, as much a part of the paintings as the man, span a 70-year career that shows no signs of stopping. Berger will spend next winter in Cuernavaca, Mexico, to escape the Normandy weather. "It's the city of eternal spring," he reminded me, as our conversation came to a close.

Jason Berger is represented by the
Judi Rotenberg Gallery, 130 Newbury St., Boston,
617-437-1518, www.judirotenberg.com
For Jason Berger's CV, see http://www.tapper-popermajer.com/cv_jb.pdf
Berger's biography, *The Paintings of Jason Berger*, by Lois Katz,
Tokyo: PharMa International c1997 is available at the Boston Public Library.



Praia da Rocha, 2001



Brighton Ave Building, 2005

Jason Berger's student, Maureen O'Connor, suggested this article. Her painting, "Brighton Ave Building", won the People's Choice Award in painting from the East Boston Open Studios, June 4 & 5, 2005.

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