

CHILDS GALLERY
ESTABLISHED 1937

COLLECTIONS

VOLUME 10 MAY 2013

Jason Berger: Outside the Lines



CHILDS GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1937

*Fine American and European Paintings,
Prints, Drawings, Watercolors and Sculpture*

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COVER **Red Café, circa 1978**
Oil on canvas
37 X 30 INCHES
Signed lower right.

COLLECTIONS

Jason Berger: Outside the Lines
Arthur Polonsky: Mythical Flight

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COLLECTIONS

VOLUMES 10 / 11

COLLECTIONS

Childs Gallery Collections is the latest in a tradition of more than seventy years of gallery publications. As early as the mid-1940s, Childs Gallery presented a publication entitled *Currier and Ives Prints: A Collection*, which represented the carefully-considered collection of a single owner. The *Childs Gallery Bulletin* (1950), the *Print Annual* (begun in 1976), and the *Painting Annual* (begun in 1980) are firmly established in art-world circles and are represented in almost every fine arts library in the country.

We continue to celebrate collections, collecting, and collectors as a pivotal axis of the art world with this unique combination of the tenth and eleventh volumes of *Childs Gallery Collections* – *Jason Berger: Outside the Lines* and *Arthur Polonsky: Mythical Flight*.

This combined volume of *Childs Gallery Collections* brings together the work of two prominent second generation Boston Expressionists, Jason Berger and Arthur Polonsky. This is the third issue of *Collections* to focus on Boston Expressionism and its offshoots, following the May 2010 publication, *Anne Lyman Powers: Mid-Century Expressionist*, and April 2012 publication, *Ture Bengtz: Life Lessons*.

The Boston Expressionists, influenced by German Expressionism, favored narrative, figurative subjects at a time when the contemporary art world embraced abstraction. Many of these artists, including such notables as Hyman Bloom, Jack Levine, and Karl Zerbe, were first and second generation Jewish immigrants who had escaped persecution in Europe during the Second World War. Their highly individualistic painting styles employed richly saturated colors, frenzied brushstrokes, and inventive figurative compositions to communicate the evils, bewilderment, and angst of their times.

Jason Berger and Arthur Polonsky belong to the second generation of Boston Expressionists whose work evolved from the Boston Expressionist philosophy. Both painters studied under Karl Zerbe at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in the 1940s and 50s, and were greatly influenced by the elder generation of Boston Expressionists. Although the two artists differ stylistically, each interpreting the lessons of Boston Expressionism in their own way, Berger and Polonsky are linked by their commitment to representational figuration and expressive gesture.

Childs welcomes both collectors and art lovers to visit the gallery to learn more about Boston Expressionism.

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COLLECTIONS

VOLUME 10

Jason Berger: Outside the Lines

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GALLERY EXHIBITION
FEBRUARY 10–APRIL 25, 2013

LEFT **The Living Room, Brookline, 1990**
Oil on canvas
49 3/8 X 35 3/8 INCHES
Signed and dated lower right. Titled verso.

Note: All works are from estate of the artist.



Jason Berger

Outside the Lines

Childs Gallery is pleased to present a seven-decade retrospective of Boston Expressionist painter Jason Berger (1924-2010), whose vivacity of color, line and brushwork speaks to the joys of life and love of place. If there is such a thing as planned spontaneity, Jason Berger would be its embodiment. Revered for the startling immediacy of his landscapes, the artist favored working *en plein air* directly from nature—painting quickly, boldly and unhesitatingly. His exuberant, wildly colorful canvases are like a celebration of finding oneself in the perfect spot at the perfect time, with Berger chomping at the bit to share what he sees.

As impulsive as that process seems, it was actually anything but, with the haphazard charm of the work belying the laborious preparation. “My painting method is like casing a joint before a robbery,” the artist joked in a 1987 newspaper interview. “It’s an adventure in a sense. I never paint a scene that I’ve seen for the first time. I look, draw, and finally come back to paint. By then I know what attracted me to it in the first place and I know what to emphasize.”

And what attracted the perennially optimistic Berger was a picture-postcard view of life. “The sun always shines on Jason Berger’s landscapes,” wrote *Art New England* critic Meredith Fife Day. “Flowers bloom in profusion, trees make robust sweeps across the horizon, and stucco houses sparkle with colors that refuse to bleach white under the glare. With a Fauve palette, an expressionistic brush, and assured academic draftsmanship underlying both, the artist takes his easel out into the world filled with visual *joie de vivre*.”

And his interiors are just as sunny as his nature scenes, Day continues, “filled with the same sensuous and bourgeois clutter Bonnard chose to paint. Berger, however, never fidgets or strokes the surfaces of objects the way Bonnard did. Instead, his marks are fast and final, wedding his French sensibility to American action-painting.”

For example, when one looks at *Michel’s Kitchen* (1992), Henri Matisse’s description of his own bravura interiors comes to mind: “fake, absurd, terrific, delicious.” But whereas the French master imposed clashing, often exotic patterns on his interiors by way of fanciful costumes and décor, Berger is fine with taking things just as they are. His paintings are therefore more casual, relaxed and inviting. While Matisse’s sumptuous artifice and tantalizing models turn us into envious voyeurs, Berger places us comfortably in the middle of Michel’s sunlit kitchen, and what a delightful place it is to be.

Now square that description with the works of Berger’s New England contemporaries like Karl Zerbe, David Aronson, and Hyman Bloom, all fellow Boston Expressionists at the city’s famed Museum School in the 1940s. Unlike those thought-provoking artists whose paintings often reflected the horrors and political upheaval of the times, “Berger’s works have no interest in ideological issues, and they do not contain symbolic, mythical, allegorical or narrative elements,” explains Lois Katz in her book *The Paintings of Jason Berger* (1997).

And there are no social messages either, unless a “stopping to smell the roses” approach to subject matter can be construed as a life lesson. Katz aptly describes Berger’s *oeuvre* as made up of “essentially friendly spaces,” the very opposite of alienation. “The mood is calm, despite the riot of color and lines or shapes.”

And though the Boston School was defiantly representational at a time when abstraction ruled the art world, “Berger was always the one most comfortable with a certain kind of abstraction,” according to the artist’s friend and fellow classmate Reed Kay. “His attitude was, ‘If the picture wants it, do it.’ Never mind if it isn’t exactly like what he has in front of him.”

A case in point is *Bridge Over St. Ouen, Paris* (circa 1955). Without the title as guide, one would be hard-pressed to recognize the scene from life—but that doesn’t stop you from wishing you’d been there with Berger as he painted, trying to see what he sees, so startlingly different from your own perceptions.

In that respect, Berger followed Picasso’s dictum: “There is no abstract art. You must always start with something.”

As in Cubism, Berger painted what was in front of him, no matter how illusory the image might [PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 16]



TOP RIGHT **Self Portrait, 1940**
Oil on canvas
24 X 20 INCHES
Signed lower right.

LEFT **Red Marilyn, circa 1960**
Oil on canvas
50 X 41 3/4 INCHES



1



2

1
Quincy Market Butcher Shop
1948

Oil on canvas

44 X 51 1/4 INCHES

Signed and dated lower right.

2
Dead Bird
circa 1945

Oil on canvas

48 X 26 INCHES

Signed lower right.



3

3
Salle Bourgeois
circa 1956

Oil on canvas

45 X 28 1/2 INCHES.

4
Cardplayers
1949

Oil on canvas

59 X 23 1/4 INCHES

Signed lower left.



4



5



6

5
The Garden Estombar
circa 1989

Oil on canvas
42 X 46 INCHES
Initialed lower right.

6
Café des Glace
2002

Oil on canvas
42 X 32 INCHES
Signed and dated lower right.



7

7
Early Landscape with Pines

Oil on canvas
44 3/4 X 57 1/2 INCHES
Signed lower right.

8
Bridge Over St. Ouen, Paris
Circa 1955

Oil on canvas
28 1/2 X 45 1/2 INCHES



8





10

9
Michel's Kitchen
1992

Oil on canvas

39 5/8 X 32 INCHES

Signed and dated lower right.

10
Flags, St. Valerie
circa 2004

Oil on canvas

27 5/8 X 35 5/8 INCHES

Signed lower right.

11
State House
1975

Oil on canvas

31 5/8 X 39 3/8 inches

Signed and dated lower right.



11



12

12
Greenhouses at Franklin Park, Boston
Circa 1986

Oil on canvas

31 1/2 X 39 INCHES

Signed lower right.



13

13
Sacavem
1979

Oil on canvas

25 3/8 X 31 1/2 INCHES

Signed and dated lower right.



14

14
Le Chateau de Cany-Barville
1966

Oil on canvas

31 7/8 X 39 3/8 INCHES

Signed and dated lower right.



15

15
Out My Window

Guoache on paper
9 1/4 X 11 1/8 INCHES

16
Landscape
1962

Oil on cardboard
8 1/3 X 13 1/8 INCHES
Signed and dated in pencil lower right.



16

[CONTINUES FROM PAGE 7] eventually appear. Conversely, Boston Expressionists most often worked “out of their heads,” according to David Aronson.

And even when abstracted forms entered their vernacular, they “showed up within the framework of a very intense humanistic concern, which was very much part of the Boston ethos, and very Jewish too,” Aronson added. “But that wasn’t Berger, who had a *joie de vivre* the others lacked, or at least weren’t interested in expressing pictorially.”

It’s not as if Berger didn’t share the troubled experiences of being a Jew in calamitous times. Born in Malden, Massachusetts in 1924, the young Yiddish-speaking Jason was continually bullied by his classmates and neighborhood toughs. His solution? Walk home the long way or crack a joke. “Anything unpleasant in his life he shuts off and he doesn’t want to hear about it,” disclosed Berger’s second wife Estella. “He does that systematically, so he’s always happy.”

Even in Berger’s early figurative schoolwork, represented here by the light-filled Impressionistic *Self Portrait* (1940), the 16-year-old reveals himself as a still unformed innocent, rather than an angry young man. And despite having to take a four-year break in his Museum School studies to serve overseas in World War II, Berger returned to class more interested in mastering a variety of painting techniques than in making any political or emotionally cathartic statement.

In *Quincy Market Butcher Shop* (1948), for example, one can clearly see the styles of Rembrandt, Chaim Soutine, and Hyman Bloom in Berger’s meat shop depictions. But while “Hyman Bloom’s paintings of decayed and rotting flesh [were] made in response to the Holocaust,” according to Danforth Museum of Art director Katherine French, Berger found nothing at all allegorical or sinister in the subject matter. The artist later explained he was just experimenting with “everything about painting I knew up to that point,” using the work to win a fellowship to study in France upon graduation from the Museum School.

When he arrived in Paris in 1949 with his first wife and fellow art student Marilyn Powers, Berger surprisingly turned down the opportunity to study with painters Fernand Léger and André Lohte, preferring lessons with Cubist sculptor Ossip Zadkine. Berger was interested in mastering issues of space, volume, scale and three-dimensionality from the renowned sculptor, who fortuitously introduced him to Matisse and Georges Braque.

“Though Jason’s work reminds many of the French Fauvists, he always said his biggest influences were cubism and be-bop,” says Berger’s third wife Leena Rekola. The artist actually considered becoming a jazz musician at one point, “but he didn’t like the lifestyle,” explained Berger’s second wife Estella Cuoto, with whom he shared a home in Portugal until she passed away in 1997. “[G]oing from place to place, late hours, drinking, whatever, didn’t suit him, and he decided not to have anything to do with that kind of life.”

Berger was very much a creature of habit, preferring to continually return to the same picturesque locations, says Rekola, also an artist. Every summer found the couple in Normandy, where Berger had been stationed during the war. “We were painting in Saint-Valery one day and I suddenly realized we were in the same spot as in one of Jason’s early works from 1949. He could paint in the same place again and again, but always paint it in a different way and in a different light.” It was like riffing in jazz.

The only one of Berger’s three wives who was not an artist, Estella was astounded by Berger’s concentration. “After a while, I realized that what I saw was not what Jason saw. . . . How does he see things that are so small while he’s driving and paying attention to what he’s doing? Yet he will see a lot of things with just a glance, left and right, in front, wherever they are. That capacity for noticing, or seeing, is quite phenomenal, unbelievable. . . .” He has four or five paintings that are almost identical, just from slightly different angles. . . . At different times of the day [with different light] he realized it was a new thing.”

Berger’s unconventional framing of his compositions also differentiates one from another. “His point of view refers to a much larger space continuing beyond the space depicted within the borders of the picture,” writes Lois Katz, “making the viewer aware that what lies just outside the visual field is part of what is seen, while the close point of view produces a fullness of space.”

And though Berger painted outdoors whenever he could, he would also go back to his studio - in Normandy, Portugal, or hometown Brookline, Massachusetts - with watercolor sketches as remembrances of a special place in a specific time, using them as a springboard for new interpretations of a scene without losing the immediacy of the moment.

Aside from Berger’s earliest school studies, his paintings are almost completely devoid of people. “He saw landscapes and interiors abstractly without people,” says Rekola. “Nevertheless, there’s always the presence of people there. Even the cafes never felt empty. [See *Red Café* (circa 1978).] He was clearly always in the middle of human life.”

And because of that humanity, Berger’s paintings are never merely decorative. There’s an emotional core that continues to surprise and captivate long after the initial viewing. Says Childs Gallery president Richard Baiano, “We are very excited to present a lifelong retrospective of Jason Berger’s works, as the structure of the show illustrates his process of early experimentation with, and mastery of, various painting techniques and movements, until the artist developed his own very personal, unpretentious, and clearly upbeat expressionist style.”

“Berger’s focus on what, for him, it means to be a painter, and his method of painting, made him one of the lonely voices in a sea of twentieth century artists trying to be loud enough or ‘dark’ enough to be heard or stand out,” concurs Lois Katz. TINA SUTTON, ARTS & STYLE JOURNALIST



Jason Berger
American (1924-2010)
Le Bassin, St. Valery-en-Caux, 2004

Oil on canvas
36 1/2 X 55 INCHES
Signed and dated lower right. Titled and inscribed verso.

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