

CHILDS GALLERY
ESTABLISHED 1937

COLLECTIONS

VOLUME 11 MAY 2013

Arthur Polonsky: Mythical Flight





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Arthur Polonsky: Mythical Flight

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GALLERY EXHIBITION
APRIL 28-JUNE 28, 2013

LEFT **Flight Shadow, circa 1979**
50 1/4 X 40 1/4 INCHES
Signed lower right.

COVER **Descent, 1983**
Oil on canvas
54 X 56 1/2 INCHES
Signed lower left.

Note: All works are from the artist. Many of these works are being exhibited for the first time.



Arthur Polonsky

Mythical Flight

A Boston Expressionist with a wholly unique worldview, Arthur Polonsky (b. 1925) has spent the past seven decades exploring man's place in an unknowable universe. Like his thought-provoking artwork, Arthur Polonsky is disquietingly enigmatic. His subjects are recognizable, yet he professes there's no inherent narrative. His vision is wholly personal, yet the imagery has an inclusive universality. And though he is inspired by poetry, mythology, and symbolism, Polonsky paints with an unbridled immediacy, "with the associations coming later," he insists. "I'm interested in unreasonable attitudes to art," he says by way of explanation. But how glorious those contradictions can be.

For seven decades, Arthur Polonsky has astounded with his virtuosity as a draughtsman and mystified with his metaphysical worldview. He came of age in the turbulent 1940s, attending the School of the Museum of Fine Arts with the likes of Karl Zerbe, Hyman Bloom, David Aronson, and Jack Levine. Later known as the Boston Expressionists, the group was defiantly representational at a time when abstraction was considered the only path to modernity. But they also eschewed traditional realism while creating a distinctly contemporary figurative idiom.

Though Polonsky shared the tenets and life experiences of his peers, his vision was surprisingly unique. Like Bloom and Aronson, he was a Jew in horrific times, but without the inner demons and conflicted spirituality that so dominated the others' work. Polonsky was not interested in social commentary. But neither was he a cheery, joyful soul, seeking to celebrate life's most pleasurable moments like Ture Bengtz and Jason Berger.

A voracious reader of poetry, literature, and philosophy, Arthur Polonsky is a deep thinker and existentialist, visually exploring man's plight and place in an unknowable universe. Again and again he returns to themes of man, myth, flight, and the abyss, but the symbolism defies specific literal interpretation, he contends.

And his colors: they are not the murky, mournful shades of Zerbe, Bloom, and Aronson, nor the sunlit, vibrant hues of Berger and Bengtz. Polonsky's palette is instead elemental, representing the earth, sky, water, and fire. It is dreamlike, yet pleasantly familiar; sometimes jarring, yet oddly peaceful.

Not rooted in the here and now, Polonsky examines his subjects from a distance, most often on high, as if he is looking down Godlike from the clouds. His figures are recognizably human, yet seemingly from another world; capable of flight, yet often disastrously earthbound. And the dimensions of many canvases are as monumental as the subject matter.

In the enormous *Descent* (1983), we see a winged man mid-air. The sky is a peaceful blue, the sea a restful blue-green. The birdman looks down into the softly breaking waves below. Upsetting the tranquil color palette is a shock of fiery orange engulfing his expansive wing and shooting upward from his feathered head. The line slices the canvas decisively with a downward trajectory. Ah, it is Icarus who has flown too close to the sun and is now falling helplessly to his death. But the ethereal painting doesn't have an air of impending doom. Perhaps this Icarus will swim to shore. He'll lie on his back, smile and look heavenward, reveling in where he has been rather than being punished for his unchecked ambitions.

"I could watch clusters of people looking at my paintings," says Polonsky, "and listen to the comments and almost look at it as they could see it - but which I'll never know - and then be far removed from my contact with it as the maker of the painting. All this I think is not only acceptable but necessary."

And what are we to make of the mysterious figure in *Ascent of the Swimmer-Spy* (c. 1975)? The head-goggles and wary facial expression suggest an aviator who has landed in unfamiliar terrain. He dominates the huge canvas, clinging to a rock wall at the water's edge while furtively taking in his surroundings. But rather than the "swimmer-spy" of the title, this figure looks completely lost and afraid.

"Arthur Polonsky may base an idea on an objective reality, but he brings to that idea a mystical, mysterious inner life that is unique," wrote his friend and fellow Museum School classmate, the artist Barbara [PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 14]

LEFT **Icarus, The Preparation, 1983**

Oil on canvas
50 1/2 X 42 INCHES
Signed lower right.



1



2

1
On the Island
1953

Oil on canvas

39 3/4 X 49 3/4 INCHES

Signed upper right.

2
The Roses
1949

Oil on canvas

15 X 18 1/8 INCHES

Signed lower left.

3
Ellie
1951

Oil on canvas

49 7/8 X 25 3/4 INCHES

Signed and inscribed verso.



3

4
The Diver
1953

Oil on canvas

44 X 30 INCHES

Signed lower right.



4



5



6

5
Loyalty to Origins
1964

Oil on canvas

47 5/8 X 59 3/4 INCHES

Signed lower right.

6
Within the Dream
1963

Oil on canvas

23 7/8 X 27 5/8 INCHES

Signed lower right.

EXHIBITED

"Arthur Polonsky: A Thief of Light," Danforth Museum of Art, February 10 - May 18, 2008.



7

7
Solitude-Solidarity
circa 1975

Oil on canvas

46 1/2 X 60 1/4 INCHES

Signed lower right.

8
Returning
circa 1964

Oil on canvas

40 1/8 X 46 1/4 INCHES

Signed lower right.

EXHIBITED

"Arthur Polonsky: A Thief of Light," Danforth Museum of Art, February 10 - May 18, 2008.



8



9



10

9
Waves Forming
circa 1975

Oil on canvas

30 3/4 X 38 INCHES

Signed lower right.

10
Window Light
circa 2002

Oil on canvas

47 1/8 X 29 5/8 INCHES

Signed lower right.



11

11
Flame Path
2013

Tempera
31 1/8 X 42 INCHES
Signed lower left.

12
Composition
circa 1990

Watercolor and ink on paper
22 1/2 X 30 1/4 INCHES
Signed lower left.



12



13
Mythical Flight
circa 1989

Ink and tempera
30 1/4 X 22 1/4 INCHES
Signed lower right.

14
Aaron's Staff
1999

Ink wash
21 3/4 X 30 INCHES
Signed lower left.

EXHIBITED
"Arthur Polonsky: A Thief of Light," Danforth Museum of Art, February 10 - May 18, 2008.

13



14



15

15
Two Birds
circa 2004

Mixed media

22 5/8 X 31 INCHES

Signed lower right.

16
Winged
1990

Charcoal and tempera

25 1/4 X 19 7/8 INCHES

Signed lower right.

EXHIBITED

"Arthur Polonsky: Artist Unmasked," St. Botolph Club,
February 13 - March 25, 2013.



16

[CONTINUES FROM PAGE 5] Swan. “Grass moves or is agitated by a strange force – a head emerging or a figure appearing seem symbolic of more than what his titles indicate.”

Born in 1925 to Russian immigrant parents in Lynn, Massachusetts, Polonsky became interested in drawing at a very young age. “His father was a tailor, and the young boy was fascinated by the way he made suit patterns by marking black paper with chalk,” explains Katherine French, Director of the Danforth Museum of Art where



Polonsky had a one-man show in 2008. “Observing his father draw lines that ‘would later become the contour of a living person,’ the boy saw a process that was ‘interesting and endlessly mysterious to sculptors and artists,’” wrote French, quoting Polonsky. And the artist’s earliest “canvases” were discarded cardboard scraps from his father’s cloth samples.

At the Museum School, Karl Zerbe would prove invaluable as both a painting instructor and conduit to German Expressionism. Soon Polonsky was so proficient in his mastery of technical skills that he served as an assistant teacher to Ben Shahn. (In later years, Polonsky would also teach at Brandeis and the Boston University School of Art from 1965-1990.)

He won a coveted two-year scholarship to study in Paris in 1948, a dream come true for any young artist. While there, Polonsky was photographed sketching in his “Parisian garret” for *Life* magazine (while smoking a pipe no less) as part of a feature story on the most promising American art students

studying abroad. Rembrandts to Picassos beckoned, but it was the symbolists Odilon Redon and James Ensor who most surprised him. Polonsky marveled at how they combined loose expressionistic brushstrokes with precise line drawings.

The American’s own talents in that area surpassed mere technical virtuosity. He became legendary for his dead-on portraiture, capturing not only a person’s likeness, but also their very souls.

“Arthur Polonsky’s drawings have the excitement of a direct response to a subject, a daring use of line or tone, a sense of charged intensity,” explains his friend Barbara Swan. “His portrait drawings not only have likeness but express a mood that is part artist, part model.” That gift helped support Polonsky in his early career as a much in-demand commissioned portraitist.

And how lucky those subjects were. One has only to look at Polonsky’s numerous drawings to realize the artist’s astonishing gifts as a draftsman, combining the technical skills of the old masters with a haunting emotional beauty. The ink and tempera *Mythical Flight* (c. 1989) is at once poetic, hypnotic and heartbreaking.



“Though Polonsky’s work defies categorization in terms of Boston Expressionism, his personal vision has remained consistent,” says Childs Gallery president Richard Baiano. “Ironically those consistencies are in the contradictions he wrestles with: the figurative and the abstract, dreams of flight versus earthly explosions, even his titles, like *Solitude–Solidarity*, express conflict. But Polonsky’s penetrating light is ever present. It’s very seductive.”

Case in point is *Flight Shadow* (c. 1979), an almost topographic view of untouched earth, water, and sky as if seen from the window of a low-flying plane. Polonsky lights a path right through the middle of the canvas, a road or river that draws the eye quickly in, through, and up. But then there’s the sudden recognition that we missed something. We go back to the bottom and suddenly notice an ominous shadow of a giant winged creature.

One last example is the light in *Flame Path* (2013), which is positively electric. Against a peaceful blue sky with white puffy clouds we see an explosion of fire. Once again, Polonsky is wrestling with destruction and rebirth, representation and abstraction. Painted by the octogenarian artist just this year, it underscores

Barbara Swan’s description of Polonsky’s lifework. “You will never find a boring area in one of his paintings. The dialogue between color, texture and subject is always alive.” TINA SUTTON, ARTS & STYLE JOURNALIST

TOP **Novalis, 1967**
Etching
10 3/8 X 13 7/8 INCHES
Number 9 in an edition of 30.

Signed and dated in pencil lower right margin; titled and numbered in pencil lower left margin.

BOTTOM **The Secret, 1959**
Charcoal
29 1/2 X 22 INCHES
Signed and dated lower right.



Arthur Polonsky
American (b.1925)
***Ascent of the Swimmer-Spy*, circa 1975**

Oil on canvas
58 X 42 1/4 INCHES
Signed lower left.

CHILDS GALLERY

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