JOHN HELIKER

THE MUSIC OF PAINTING

Above: John Heliker in his studio on Cranberry Island, Maine, c. 1980.

JOHN HELIKER:
THE MUSIC OF PAINTING

Curated by Deborah Rosenthal, Professor of Fine Arts

RIDER UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

March 13 - April 20, 2014

OPENING RECEPTION

Thursday, March 13, 5-7 p.m.

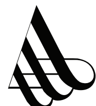
RECITAL

"American Art Song"
Students of Westminster Choir College, *singers*
J.J. Penna, *pianist and accompanist*
Introduced by Professor Lindsey Christiansen

GALLERY INFORMATION

Tuesday to Thursday • 11 a.m. - 7 p.m.
Sunday • noon - 4 p.m.

In cooperation with the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation



This exhibition is funded in part by a grant from the Mercer County Cultural and Heritage Commission, New Jersey State Council on the Arts, Department of State.

◀ *In Central Park*
Oil on linen, 15 x 12 1/16 inches
c. 1978

INTRODUCTION

John Heliker's paintings and drawings seem to me to have a natural place in our University Gallery, first of course because they open a beautifully imagined world to us the viewers; but also because their author was a beloved and generous teacher and mentor, at Columbia University for many years, at the New York Studio School, and later in the Parsons MFA program. Like the painter, the paintings are persuasive in the most unassuming and gracious way. With their streams of brushstrokes, their thin but luminous washes of color, and their gently shifting and almost interlocking vertical and horizontal planes, the paintings dance on the bedrock of Heliker's fine drawing. The combined effects of his drawing and his color convey great lessons about the art of composing; his long life of dedication to his art, a great lesson to young artists starting out on that life.

DEBORAH ROSENTHAL
Professor of Fine Arts,
Curator of the exhibition

Studio with Three Figures ▶
Oil on linen, 16 x 12 inches
c. 1984

ON JOHN HELIKER

John Heliker's paintings are imperishable dreams. The relatively small canvases in this show, many of them produced when Heliker was in his seventies and early eighties, reflect the varied strands of his imaginative life: views of the Maine coast where he spent his summers; bouquets of wildflowers; casually bohemian interiors; kitchen still lifes; self-portraits; Arcadian vistas dominated by the vigorous simplicity of clam diggers and male bathers. For Heliker the canvas is a privileged and even perhaps a sacred precinct, the field where the grand games of memory and imagination are played, with experiences summoned up rather than recorded. The paintings, with their calligraphic brushwork, are at once acts of contemplation, improvisation, and speculation. A friend of mine once observed that Heliker's paintings are like images coming into focus in a magic lantern. And the sense of something that is forever coming into being, never entirely clear, is essential to this art in which finali y is irreconcilable with the truth of experience.

Jack, as everybody called him, was courtly and handsome, but what gave depth to his considerable charm was his fearlessly romantic spirit. He followed his heart. He had dedicated himself to art when he was still an adolescent. And he lived quite openly as a homosexual at a time when that was not easy. Those of us who were lucky enough to be his friends knew that his intelligence was in equal parts exacting and poetic. I will not forget the many mornings I spent with him at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We would sit in front of a Poussin or a wall of Corots and talk about everything under the sun. The meandering conversations seemed somehow related to the paintings, although in ways

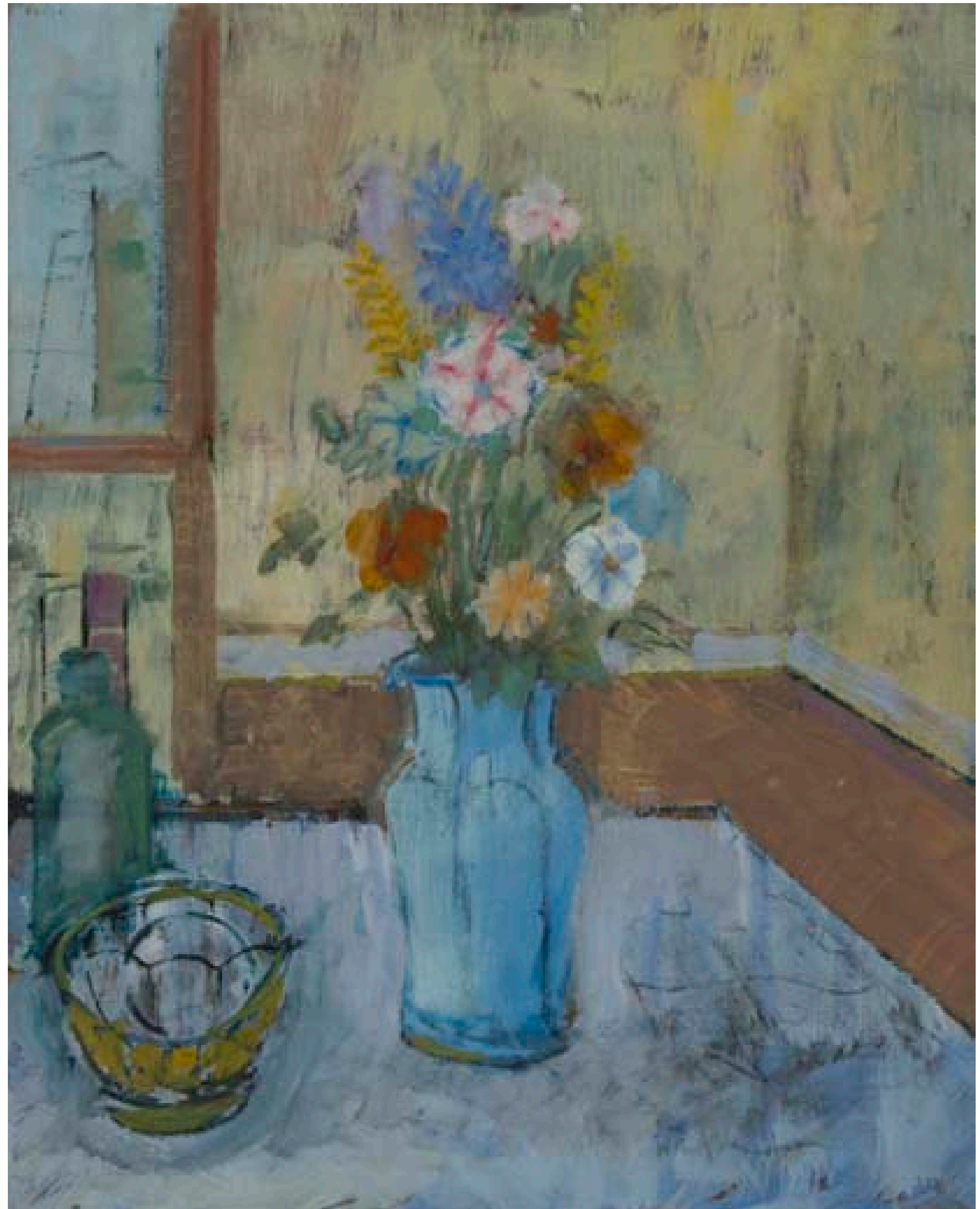
I could not explain beyond knowing that it felt good to talk about things that mattered while looking at paintings we loved. Perhaps Jack believed there was some lesson to be learned about the unity of all experience, some connection between Poussin's classical figures and Corot's silvery forests and the everyday matters that dominated our talk. Even as we talked, I sensed that Jack's mind was elsewhere, looking for the key that unlocked a painting's secrets. That key might turn out to be hidden in plain sight, in a passage of modest but eloquent brushwork or in the way a single object was set against the patterned surface of a wall.

When Jack was up in Maine during the summer, in the old sea captain's house that he shared with his life partner, the painter Robert LaHotan, he would send one or another friend a couple of letters recording the fever charts of his days in the studio. The first letter generally arrived in July, when Jack was complaining about how little work he had done, the second late in August, when he invariably expressed astonishment that he had managed to begin several dozen paintings, of which he thought a few might be promising. Jack regarded art as an ideal order that nevertheless had to be reconciled with the magnificent disorderliness of life. So far as he was concerned, pictorial structure was always in a state of construction, the painting a particular resolution of ultimately unresolvable conflicts. Jack had no use for Plato's pure forms, although there was certainly something of the Socratic give-and-take about his intellectual friendships with the young artists who started out as his students.

Painting was John Heliker's lifeblood. My impression was that when he missed more than a couple of days in the studio he did not really feel like himself. And I doubt there was a day in his life, until his last difficult years in a nursing home, when he did not spend at least a little time with a sketchbook. A visit to the studio, where there was always new work to see, was one of the great pleasures of knowing Jack. So long as he was working and exhibiting at the Kraushaar Galleries, which represented his work for more than fif y years, it was natural that the new paintings trumped the old. Only now, a decade after his death at the age of ninety-one, are the deep sources of his late style beginning to come clear. Although we had always known a little about the work he was doing in the 1930s and 1940s, it is becoming evident that the incisive attack and bold specifici y of those early drawings and paintings prepared the way for the ease of his mature achievement, in which the telegraphic line suggests so much that's left unsaid. And although we had known of Jack's involvement in the worlds of modern music and dance in the 1940s—he lived for some years with a promising composer, Merton Brown, and was friends with Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Lou Harrison—the extent of his immersion in musical matters has been overlooked. It was Jack who helped Lou Harrison see his little book about Carl Ruggles into print, and Jack knew Ruggles and was very much a presence as Harrison prepared some of Charles Ives's most important compositions for premieres decades after they had been written.

Music offers a key to John Heliker's artistic imagination. It is in music, more than any other of the arts, that structural discipline shapes ineffable emotion. And that's precisely what Jack wants to happen in his paintings. There is something of the improvisational freedom of jazz in the way he works variations on the familiar themes of landscape, figure, still life, and interior. What concerns him is not the world as it is immediately experienced but the world as it can be remembered and reimagined. Sometimes he lingers on a particular object, offering a loving rendition of a head of garlic or a coffee mill. (Jack was certainly not indifferent to the strong physical effects of garlic and coffee.) At other times his quickening brushwork abstracts the familiar, suggesting not so much a particular place as the possibility of a spirit of place. During our visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jack would sometimes linger over a canvas by the eighteenth-century Venetian painter Guardi, surely attracted by the sense of a painting as a capriccio, an improvisation. In John Heliker's finest paintings there is a rococo lightness but also a saturnine undercurrent. The complex emotional weather is reflected in the beautiful orchestrations of grays, moving from dawn's opalescence to dusk's smoky sonorities.

Jed Perl
is the art critic for The New Republic and Chairman of the Board of the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation.



◀ *Spring Flowers in a Blue Vase*
Oil on Masonite, 15 x 13 inches
c. 1992

Bouquet of Flowers in the Corner ▶
Oil on linen, 20 x 16 inches
c. 1963

Interior With Hanging Plant
Oil on linen, 20 x 18 inches
c. 1988

Young Man by the Sea, Maine
Oil on Masonite, 16 x 20 inches
c. 1989

Study of Boy Shucking Clams
Oil on linen, 16 x 12 inches
c. 1988

Three Figures on Cranberry Island
Oil on linen, 24 x 20 ¼ inches
c.1987

Two Bathers
Oil on Masonite, 15 7/8 x 12 inches
c. 1982

John Heliker showed regularly in New York for several decades. In the following letter, his friend Louis Finkelstein (1923-2000), a New York painter and influential writer and teacher of painting (and neighbor on Cranberry Island), writes to him probably around 1970, about the qualities and quality of Heliker's drawings and paintings in a recent show.

Dear Jack,

Forgive me for not writing sooner but I don't write so easily as you might suspect ….

Your work presents several factors and I can only give you my reading of these. Preeminently your painting works through the mind, through the memory, and then projects itself onto the surface of the canvas. To have a motif (in view) is, for you, not only to analyze its appearance (which you do to a degree and then in a sense do not) but also to come to some felt conclusions about your psychological, conceptual, emotional, spiritual, i.e., actually felt, relation to it. This is I think the important factor in your work and that which relates you to such people as Cézanne, Mondrian, Giacometti, Matisse, also de Hooch, Steen and Terborch. The feeling thus arrived at, whether a priori or in the process of search, manifests itself in the choices of what are commonly called the structural elements of the painting such as scale, rhythm, weight, focus--the most important of which is measure--which means measure of all sorts--the dimensions actually of various intervals on the canvas, the dimensions spatially which they imply but proportions also of light, color, tension, weight, focus.

What I see you doing is receiving abstract or poetized ideas of being from the motif which you then reconcretize--through the elements of your style--into the picture.

Now when I say elements of style I mean your stroke, your personal sense of mode of presentation, how a color stroke models a form, that is, both the kinds of schemes you entertain and how you render them. The style is most complete when the elements of scheme and rendering mutually present the most cohesive and coherent concretization of what I call these poetized (or poeticized) ideas. The importance of poeticized ideas as I conceive them is that they indicate what is *real* in the transactions between the individual and the world. That is, they show the *how* of experience: what is its actually experienced nature; how the sense of things comes in to us, or *what the world means,* that is the mediating term between the who, the us, the person, the soul and the it, the what, the things and the world!

Art--the structure--exists for the purpose of testing to ourselves through the mediation of a fi ed place to put our several insights, aperçus whereby we test and re-experience and contemplate their mutuality, their interpenetration, their system, their higher orders of interpenetration, integration, interpretability--that is, the fi ed place is the painting, wherein all the elements create each other.

Now, in your show I saw increasing purity of measure as well as subtlety, the two--purity and subtlety--re-informing each other with a greater sense of meaning.…The main fact of the show to me was when the paintings did convince--their convincingness--which I mean not in the sense of well painted or some other such jumping-over an obstacle course of presumed requirements, but their *delivery*, that which is poetically distilled. Less and less do people either seem to be concerned with this or touched by it. Tant pis! I think it is what really counts.

As to the drawings--here I think because the work is more quickly consummated and therefore more completely sustained the level of poetic completion is very high. Any number of them are already masterly drawings in the true sense of what we mean by master and I am quite sure can hang on the same wall with any of this century or others.

With fondest regards,

Louis

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

John Heliker was born in Yonkers, New York in 1909. His father was a stonemason. Heliker left high school in 1923 in order to dedicate himself to art; he studied painting at the Art Students League in New York from 1927 to 1929. He had the first of three one-man exhibitions at the Maynard Walker Gallery in New York in 1936, and in the later 1930s he was doing drawings for New Masses and joined the easel division of the WPA Federal Art Project. When the Maynard Walker Gallery closed in 1941, Heliker began his long association with the Kraushaar Galleries, where he exhibited his work for more than fif y years. He had made a trip to Maine as early as 1925, and more than a quarter century later, in 1958, he purchased an old sea-captain's house on Great Cranberry Island. This was where he spent summers with his life partner, the painter Robert LaHotan. It is now the home of the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation, where painter Patricia Bailey, a close friend of Heliker and LaHotan, has established a Residency Program for artists. Since 2005, the Foundation has brought seventy artists to work on Great Cranberry Island.

From the 1940s until his death in 2000 at the age of 91, John Heliker played a vital role in the artistic and cultural life of New York City. Among his friends were Lou Harrison, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham. He first got to know Philip Guston when they were both awarded the Prix de Rome in 1948. And Walker Evans took memorable photographs of the Cranberry Island house in the 1960s. Beginning in 1941, Heliker's work was regularly exhibited in the annual and biannual exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art; he was the subject of a retrospective at the Whitney in 1968. In the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing number of younger artists were attracted by Heliker's independent painterly vision. Many of them had begun as his students. He taught at Columbia University for twenty-seven years, and retired in 1974. He was among the founding faculty of the New York Studio School of Painting and Sculpture, and he later joined the faculty of the MFA Painting Program at the Parsons School of Design. Heliker was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letter, where he served several terms as Vice President for the Arts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Patricia Bailey, President of the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation, and Jed Perl, Chairman of the Board of the Foundation, for all sorts of help in making this exhibition possible, and for the essay by Jed Perl which appeared, in a slightly different version, in the catalogue of an exhibition at Davis and Langdale and Company in New York in 2012. I also appreciate Julio Torres' work on aspects of this show. Cecily Langdale and Roy Davis have been gracious in matters connected with this exhibition. I am grateful to have had the permission of Henry Finkelstein to reprint the late Louis Finkelstein's letter to John Heliker, which comes from the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation archives.

Deborah Rosenthal

Front Cover

Blue Vase
(Kitchen Still Life with Coffee Grinder and Blue Vase)
Oil on linen, 16 1/8 x 20 inches
c. 1982

Back Cover

Maine
Oil on linen, 14 x 17 inches
c. 1992

Photography of works of art:
John Goodrich

Design and Layout
Dax Finley

Self-Portrait in the Studio
Oil on linen, 24 x 20 inches
c. 1988