

Prospectus

An exhibition circulated by the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation, Inc.,
in association with Stephen F. Austin State University



John Heliker

Drawing on the New Deal, 1932-1948

An exhibition of the artist's early drawings curated by David A. Lewis,
Professor of Art History, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas



Self-portrait, 23 years old (detail), c. 1932

John Heliker: *Drawing on the New Deal* marks the rediscovery of a remarkable and largely unknown body of work by an eminent American artist. An extraordinarily accomplished draftsman, John Heliker (1909-2000) developed a highly personal and expressive approach to drawing during the WPA years. His early drawings and sketches are comparable to those of his Social Realist contemporaries Ben Shahn (1898-1969) and Philip Evergood (1901-73). Heliker shared in their political activism, and he produced many potently anti-fascist cartoons for the leftist publication *The New Masses* (c. 1937—1941), some of which are represented here. During the Second World War and the immediate Postwar years, Heliker earned critical acclaim for



his bold experimentations with biomorphic and architectonic abstraction. By the late 1950s his drawing style became more muted, and he achieved a tonalist manner of great poignancy. In the late 1950s and subsequent decades, he developed a nuanced, impressionistic painting style in response to abstract expressionism—an approach that was to characterize his mature style, and it is for this latter work that Heliker is now best known.



Abstraction from a Sketchbook, c. 1936

John Heliker was active in the New York art scene from the 1940s onward. From the beginning, his art won the respect of his peers and critics alike. He earned numerous professional honors, including the Prix de Rome, a Guggenheim fellowship, three Ford Foundation purchase prizes, election to both the National Academy and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Heliker earned the rare privilege of a full scale retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1968) and was awarded two honorary doctorate of fine art degrees (Colby College, 1966; Bard College, 1991). Heliker's art is represented in the collections of nearly 80 institutions across the country. He is also the subject of a short documentary film: *John Heliker—The Inner Compass of Certainty* (produced by the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation in 1998).



Merce Cunningham Seated, c. 1945

John Heliker was closely connected with such abstract expressionists as Philip Guston (1913-80), who became a life-long friend. A highly influential teacher, Heliker helped many aspiring artists during his years as a member of the Columbia University art faculty (1947-74) and later at the Art Students League of New York (1975-78). He was a founding faculty member of the well-known New York Studio School in 1965 (with fellow artists Philip Guston, Leland Bell, Charles Cajori, and Mercedes Matter). John Heliker was also associated with important composers: Carl Ruggles, John Cage, and Lou Harrison, and he created mask and possibly set designs for choreographer Merce Cunningham, another close friend.

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Spanning a period from the years 1932-1948, a time in which John Heliker created powerfully expressive figure drawings, cubist-inspired landscapes, and biomorphic abstractions in diverse media, this exhibition brings attention to a remarkable aspect of his art that remains obscure. Most of the fifty original drawings and watercolors, and two of the three sketchbooks in this exhibition belong to the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation, which holds the artist's estate. Only a few of these works have been exhibited within the past sixty years, and most have been seen only by the artist himself and by a few visitors to his studio.



Hitler Defies World, c. 1938

Exhibition specifications:

Number of Works

44 framed works on paper (mostly ink drawings, some graphite, some mixed media and watercolor)

Three sketchbooks (to be displayed under bonnets)

Frame Sizes

16 x 20" or 20 x 16" (40 x 50cm and 50 x 40cm), with a few frames in other proportions

Space Requirements

Approximately 78 linear feet (framed works)

Range of 130 to 220 running feet of wall space recommended

Booking Period

8 weeks

Availability

June 15, 2011—Spring 2013

Participation Fee

\$1,800 (additional \$300 for listing in the exhibition catalogue)

Supporting Publications

96-page exhibition catalogue, illustrated in color and b/w.

Essay by David A. Lewis; forward by Jed Perl. Published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press. (Projected publication date: Spring 2011.)

Perfect bound paperback, with a limited number of clothbound copies available.

John Heliker: The Inner Compass of Certainty, 34-minute documentary film, ©1998 The Heliker-LaHotan Foundation, Inc., is available in DVD format to venues for educational use in association with the exhibition.



A Life Drawing Class, c. 1938-42

“There is a seismographic eloquence about John Heliker’s early drawings ... as he responds to the astringencies of the Depression, the charged emotions of the home front during World War II, and the revelatory friendships that marked the beginnings of his life in art.”

—Jed Perl, author, art critic for *The New Republic*



Pages of Studies from a Sketchbook, with notes by the artist, late 1930s-early 1940s

Guest curator David A. Lewis, Professor of Art History and former Director of the SFA School of Art, is a specialist in Modern American and European art.

Dr. Lewis is the general editor of LaNana Creek Press, the fine arts press of Stephen F. Austin State University, which he cofounded with Charles D. Jones in 1998.

Lewis was the first art historian recipient of a Heliker-LaHotan Foundation Summer Residency Fellowship (2009). Drawing upon the Foundation’s archive of many previously unpublished Heliker documents—diaries, letters, notebooks and sketchbooks—his research for the accompanying exhibition catalogue sheds new light on Heliker’s role in shaping 20th-century American art and culture.

For more information about John Heliker and hosting this exhibition, please visit heliker-lahotan.org or contact The Heliker-LaHotan Foundation, Inc., 2 Heliker Road, P.O. Box 82, Cranberry Isles, ME 04625, 207-244-7772; email: foundation@heliker-lahotan.org

Download illustrated checklist (10.1 MB) at www.heliker-lahotan.org/checklist.pdf