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Irving Petlin's Armada of Discontent

Whatever your life story, it is part of a larger history – this is what Petlin recognizes and is perhaps why he suppresses the personal or anecdotal.

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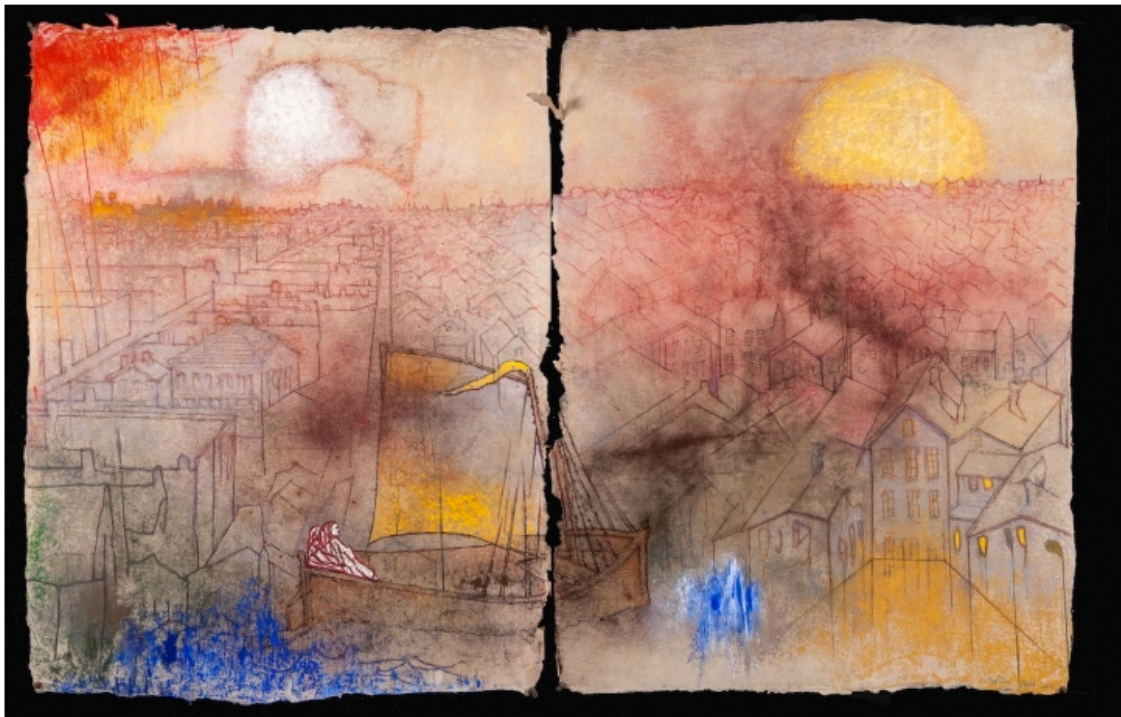
Irving Petlin, "STORMS: Towed to Sea (1912)" (2012), pastel on handmade paper, 28 x 35 inches (all images courtesy Kent Fine Art)

Irving Petlin's talent was recognized early: he was a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago when he was a teenager, and many of his classmates, who there on the G.I. Bill, were a decade older. This is why he was the youngest artist in the exhibition, *Monster Roster: Existentialist Art in Postwar Chicago* at the Smart Museum of the University of Chicago (February 11 – June 12, 2016), which included work by Leon Golub, June Leaf, Seymour Rosofsky, Nancy Spero, and H.C. Westermann. While Jean Dubuffet, who gave a lecture,

“Anticultural Positions,” on December 20, 1951, at the Arts Club in Chicago, influenced many of the artists in the exhibition, Petlin was not one of them.

Petlin is committed to being a witness to history, but he does not make overtly political art, as did his friends Golub and Spero. He is not celebrated for his depictions of brutality, which I cannot help but think is deliberate. Petlin’s talent is such that he can depict anything he wishes, and he chose not to turn human suffering into pictorial spectacle.

Instead of being expressionist or realist, his art has often been described as poetic, which is a word that writers resort to when they are stymied by what they are looking at, but want to show they appreciate it all the same. At a time when craft is often regarded with suspicion, Petlin draws and pastel is his favorite medium. Think of it — a politically committed artist who draws beautifully and uses pastel and elects not to depict conspicuous examples of human brutality. None of this adds up in a simple way, which is precisely why people should be interested in Petlin.



Irving Petlin, “STORMS: Yellow Sail, Chicago” (2012), pastel on handmade paper, diptych: overall: 35 ½ x 55 1/8 inches

While living in Los Angeles, six months before the Watts riots he started working on a large, four-panel painting, “The Burning of Los Angeles” (1965-1967), which adopts its title from a painting described in Nathaniel West’s great, scornful novel about Hollywood, *The Day of the Locust* (1939). Petlin’s painting is an allegorical vision of black men stuck in an insufferable environment. There is no overt reference to living conditions or police brutality, but you would have to be blind not to see and feel the rage and pain pulsing through Petlin’s painting, which currently sits in storage at the de Young/Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco.

In the winter of 1966, Petlin and Mark di Suvero created the Peace Tower in the West Hollywood neighborhood of Los Angeles to protest the Vietnam War. He was central to the creation and distribution of 50,000 copies of the anti-Vietnam poster, “And babies” (December 26, 1969), but did not sign it.

This is not all that Petlin does wrong in terms of self-promotion, which, as far as I can tell, he has never done. He is not known for his interviews or given to making sweeping pronouncements, as did many of his friends. He never let himself become either a poster child or a spokesperson for any political cause or protest, I suspect

because he regards it as a form of egotism. Political action must be collective, not personal, while art making is another matter.

I wonder if we expect a different kind of art from Petlin, and are disappointed that he does not make it easy for us to put him in a box or regard him as a particular kind of figure, at once quickly understood and easily shunted aside.



Irving Petlin, "STORMS: Paris Landing" (2012), pastel on paper, 26 13/16 x 34 5/8 inches

Petlin's art does not tell us everything all at once, like a blabbermouth concierge or neighborhood gossip, and nothing is ever spelled out. Imagination plays a central role, and you have to unpack the work. In his large paintings, his expansive views are often atmospheric and moody, oddly lit. As other writers have pointed out, he extends the symbolism of Odilon Redon and James Ensor into new territory, but, although he is as unfashionable as these idiosyncratic artists once were, this tells only part of the story. Complicating all of this is Petlin's love of yellow, which may connect to summer heat and dust, Vincent van Gogh's paintings of sunflowers, the Star of David, desert sands, sunlight, fire, or something less definable — or all of what I listed.

There is something right about the fact that the exhibition [A Tribute to Irving Petlin](#) is at the National Arts Club (October 30, 2017 – January 4, 2018), a Victorian Gothic Revival brownstone across the street from Gramercy Park, and that there is no commercial gallery nearby. The show is in two adjacent exhibition spaces with black walls, lending a funereal air. One of the spaces is a large room complete with a covered piano, and the other is a wide corridor that is blocked off, a dead end. Eleven pastels collectively titled *Storms, After Redon* including one depicting the Titanic, are displayed in this corridor. It is as if moving further down this foreboding passageway might bring you into an unknown chamber of a ship where infernal goings-on are a daily occurrence.

I begin to think allegorically whenever I look at Petlin's art, and, like Antonin Artaud in Mexico, soon suspect that the world *is* full of signs, but that I do not actually want to read them. The series of 11 pastels is complimented by four large paintings: "The Eleventh of January" (2009), "Hebron" (1998-2001), "Encounter at

the *Maison du Pastel*" (1983), and "Revolution Pastoral" (1978-81). There are also two paintings from a recent and I presume ongoing series, *Madonna of Slavery* and three pastels.



Irving Petlin, "STORMS: Landing, Chicago" (2012), pastel on handmade paper, diptych: overall: 35 ½ x 55 1/8 inches

Together, the 11 pastels that make up the series *Storms* are an excellent introduction to Petlin's art and thinking. Each is subtitled, with references to cities and places: Chicago, Paris, Brooklyn, waterfall, and Nile. The titles and subjects of the drawings suggest that Petlin is addressing different overlapping histories. The recurring image is a boat, which changes from a felucca to a sailboat inspired by Odilon Redon's pastel, "*La Voile jaune*" ("The Yellow Sail," ca. 1905), which is in the collection of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, to the Titanic being towed out to sea.

One history recounted here is that of his parents migrating from Poland to America and settling in Chicago, where he was born in 1934. Another is that of the artist and his own family moving from New York to Paris in the mid-1990s. These histories take place within larger histories: the Jews being driven out of Egypt and fleeing pogroms. Whatever your life story, it is part of a larger history — this is what Petlin recognizes and is perhaps why he suppresses the personal or anecdotal: he feels there is a bigger story to tell.

The pastels in *Storms* are done on irregular sheets of reddish-brown, handmade paper, a color that evokes earth and sand. In the large pastels, the artist places two sheets together, side-by-side, like pages in a book. In the diptych, "Landing in Chicago" (2012), the outline of a two-masted felucca spans the two ragged-edged sheets: the boat floats in the foreground on swells of blue waves. Just to the left of the felucca, peeking over the horizon, Petlin has drawn an orange sun. Is it rising or sinking?

The felucca's back sail is yellow, connecting it to Redon's pastel. The silhouettes of Chicago — a series of rooftops — recede toward the horizon, becoming more faint and abstract as they move up the surface, stopping about three-quarters of the way up. A large red smudge on the right-hand sheet of paper obliterates part of a

building, while the rest of the skyline becomes a series of abstract lines. The free-floating color; the abstraction; the separate sheets of paper; the sun that is setting or rising — all evoke the doorstep of infinity.



Irving Petlin, “STORMS: The Nile (pour Sarah)” (2012), pastel on handmade paper, diptych: overall: 35 x 55 15/16 inches

In the diptych, “The Nile (For Sarah)” (2012), there are faint outlines of human profiles in the horizontal striations of water, which spans the entire width of the separate sheets. Who are these anonymous figures? History is always with us, a haunting presence we may wish to acknowledge and learn from, or choose to ignore. What is decided individually and collectively may never align.

The narratives Petlin tells are epic, but shown through the lens of anonymous individuals — the figures gathered in the boat and the profiles of those in the river and elsewhere. We see them and we don’t see them, a tension that speaks to us about empathy. How much do we actually see? How much can an artist actually show? What does it mean to be a witness? There is a material tenderness and vulnerability running through *Storms* that are rare in contemporary art. Petlin does not depict vulnerability or, its opposite, brutality. Rather, he merges his vision of a susceptible world with his choice of materials and processes — colored dust, faint lines, colored streaks and stains, paper worn down from rubbing.

In *Storms*, the artist seems to be acknowledging both persistence and exposure— the open boat with its family huddled in the stern, and the melding of dust on thin sheets of paper. To regard Petlin as a symbolist is to ignore how much his use of materials underscores his worldview, that we permanently exist on the brink of infinity. In “Towed to Sea (1912)” (2012), which was made during the centenary of the Titanic’s fateful, maiden voyage, Petlin’s outline of the famed ship is filled with white, a sign of its impending collision with an iceberg.



Irving Petlin, "Hebron" (1998 – 2001), pastel and oil on unprimed Belgian linen, diptych: overall 84 x 192 inches

I think Petlin's decision not to show us the face of someone who has been brutalized is both aesthetic and ethical: he does not believe a single individual can represent pervasive inhumanity. The outlines of anonymous figures in the diptychs, "Hebron" and "The Eleventh of January," underscore the anonymity of suffering: it is something that happens to others. We did not see the bodies of the children and adults murdered at the Sandy Hook Elementary School nor did we see the bodies of those killed recently in Las Vegas. Instead, we see people hugging each other and crying. We see armed men in uniform coming to protect us. We see the veneer of civility and order, and society goes on pretending everything is okay because we are afraid to witness what we have become.

In the poster "And Babies," we see the bullet-riddled bodies of men, women, and children, the victims of the My Lai massacre, lying dead in a dirt road. By drawing the faint outlines of those who are being murdered by an individual or the state, Petlin shows us what we cannot see and, in some cases, the carnage we have chosen not to contemplate. The subjects Petlin addresses, and the many questions he raises, are distressing because he offers no answers, no way to disavow responsibility. Rather than showing the dead and dying, he shows us that we cannot see them, or perhaps turned away from them, eager to get on with our lives. We live in a country where collective mourning is forbidden.

There are no heroes in Petlin's work and much of the suffering and fear is portrayed on the brink of invisibility. His work brims with yearning, vulnerability, and sorrow — conditions almost completely absent from much contemporary art.

[A Tribute to Irving Petlin](#) continues at the National Arts Club (15 Gramercy Park South, Gramercy Park, Manhattan) through January 4, 2018.