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Art

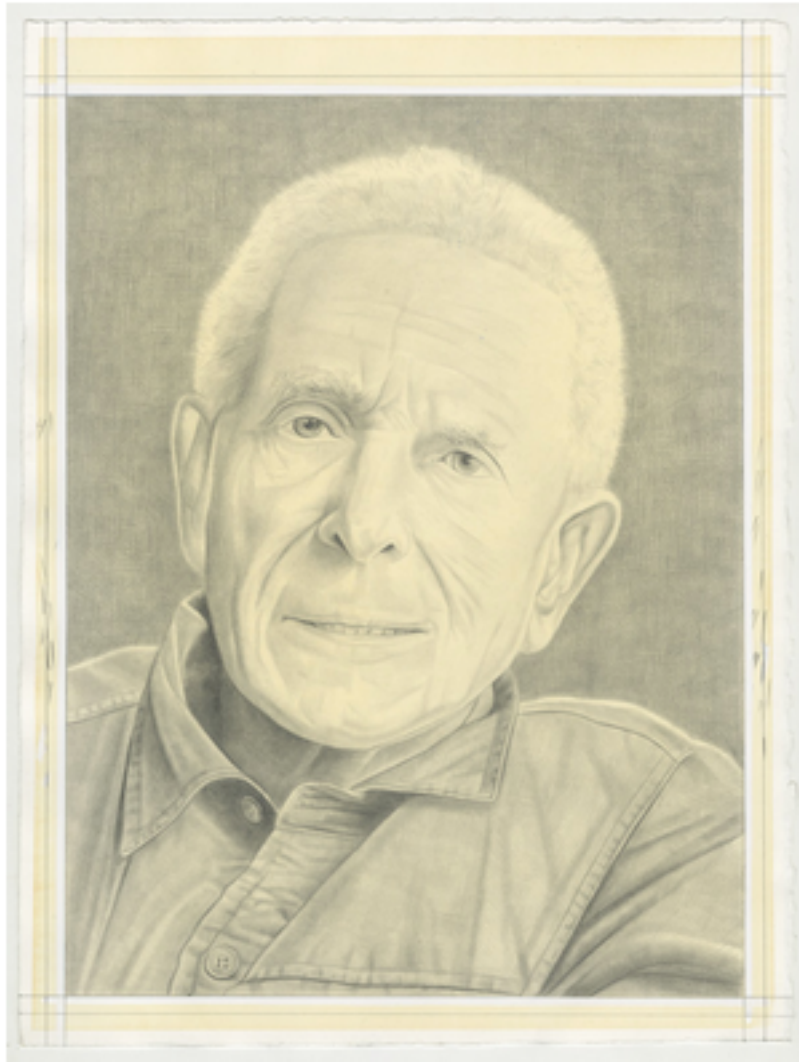
IN CONVERSATION

IRVING PETLIN with Elyse Benenson



Irving Petlin, *Towed to Sea (1912)*, 2012. Pastel on handmade paper
28 x 35 inches. Courtesy Kent Fine Art.

Irving Petlin is the world's premier living pastel artist. He is currently an expatriate, living in Paris, France. We sat down at the National Arts Club to discuss his current exhibition there, and his history as an activist and artist.



Portrait of Irving Petlin, pencil on paper by Phong Bul

Elyse Benenson (Rail): I thought that we would start with the works that are in this show at the National Arts Club. There is the *Storms* series from 2012, which are made with pastels, a major painting from the 1970's *Calcium Garden* series, and two new paintings, the *Madonnas of Slavery*. Can you tell me about those?

Irving Petlin: The *Madonnas of Slavery* pieces are nearly the last paintings I did. I have almost stopped painting now and devoted the entirety of my work to pastel, partially because of certain kinds of physical disabilities on my part. I'm in chemo and it limits my mobility so I can't work large anymore. The pastel gives me a concentrated place to be, with the hand and the head and the heart very close to the paper.

I made four of the *Madonnas*. The subject grew as I was reading about how the police killings in America were creating a movement where black people were feeling not how they always felt—the victims—but special victims, special victims of American brutality towards their race, that slavery had been built into American consciousness. And when black people rose up they were put down with the same intensity as during the period of slavery. And I thought, Christianity has all of these saints, Madonnas and figures to worship, who were protective in moments of oppression, why not a Black Madonna?

There were many women who did so much to sacrifice themselves for the cause of Black freedom. So, I invented Madonnas and I started with four canvases and thought, "I'm going to try and see if I can use a beautiful face in four different circumstances." In the one where the boat appears on the left, that's the bringing of them to the new world. Offset by one on the far right, a slave picture from the Persian Empire of people

attached by their necks who were slaves being led from one place to another, presided over by this beautiful but hurt face. And then I went to another one, and it became this terrible smear of blood coming out of her breast, and there's a black hand being held by a white hand around her neck. Each one has an element of what slavery did to people who were removed from their world and placed in a servile world where they were mistreated for over a hundred and fifty years. That's what the Black Madonna does.



Irving Petlin, *Madonna of Slavery IV*, (2015), Oil on Linen. 29 × 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. / 73.6 × 59.7 cm. Courtesy Kent Fine Art.

Rail: In the art of your longtime friend, Leon Golub, politics are explicit, but in your work, it is very subtle.

Petlin: Yes. The comparison you make between Golub and myself is apt; we were close friends. We were family in a sense. But, in the political sphere, as painters, Golub was an artist whose work screamed its message to the viewer. My idea was to bring the viewer into the picture. I had to seduce him or her into thinking about something. It was a different way of having a consciousness inside the work. His was on the surface, telling you, “See what you've done? See what you've created?” And mine was more like, “Come here. Think about this. But, come here, first. Get inside here. I have something to tell you.” And that's what was the difference between the two of us.

Rail: I find those kinds of subtler but more strategic statements in your work interesting. What happened to the body of work you created for Documenta in 1987 that included imagery of Shtetls or Jewish life? Why was it rejected?

Petlin: They're more dangerous because they are often beautiful. That's what makes them dangerous to certain people who don't want to go inside those questions, again—if ever. It was a German commissioner of

Documenta who rejected it, which was unusual at that time. There was a move to open up Germany to the notion of what their responsibility was. I was surprised; I was angry that it was rejected, but I just kept working.

Rail: Aside from your involvement as an activist, erecting the *Peace Tower* (1966) and the Art Workers Coalition—among many other organizations that you were involved with or even started—please tell me about the *Calcium Gardens* series. The scale of the paintings has a presence that has the effect of bringing the landscape of Vietnam directly to American viewers in a dangerously beautiful way.

Petlin: What I was depicting was big. The paint had to contain some thing of the mangling of human beings and turning bodies into calcium. The calcium garden idea comes from the fact that Vietnam was a horrible killing field, it's a bone-yard, global bone-yard. It was America's intention to complete that killing field; it was the peace movement's intention to hold the worst from happening. We didn't win, but we held the worst from happening. It was like the hammer was held above these people and we held the hammer from hitting them full force.



And Babies? Dec. 26, 1969. Artist Worker's Coalition. Courtesy Kent Fine Art.

I was with Robert Storr yesterday and we spoke about the poster I did with Jon Hendricks [*Q. And babies? A. And babies.* (1970)] “That poster was kind of a work of a genius,” he said, “because the visual combination of that image and the words ‘and babies? and babies’ knocked everybody out.” It said exactly what people were feeling without preaching to them, without yelling and screaming.

Rail: None of the artists that made the posters signed them because the intention was for the public and not as art objects.

Petlin: Exactly, it was not meant to be an artwork it was meant to be a *d'affiche*, a poster that is plastered on the walls. And it was, by the hundreds, all over the country. Because people carried them under their arm when they went somewhere, that poster appeared everywhere. Because it did kind of bring to a particular point of focus what had been in the air. And a great political poster is supposed to do that, and that's very hard to do. And it's very hard to do today because of the dispersal of imagery.

Rail: Your attraction to newspapers and journalism started as a small child in Chicago...

Petlin: I was born in 1934 and when the war began I became fascinated because we had a big family in Europe—part of the Petlin family had emigrated, but a big part of it had not—and I knew what was happening because I read the newspaper every day as a child. I had no children's books, I learned to read, literally, in the Chicago paper that my father would bring home from work every day.

The generation in Chicago that preceded my generation at the Art Institute was in the war: Seymour Rosofsky, Leon Golub, they were all in WWII in various ways, Cliff Westermann was in the Navy Marines... all of them had direct experience.

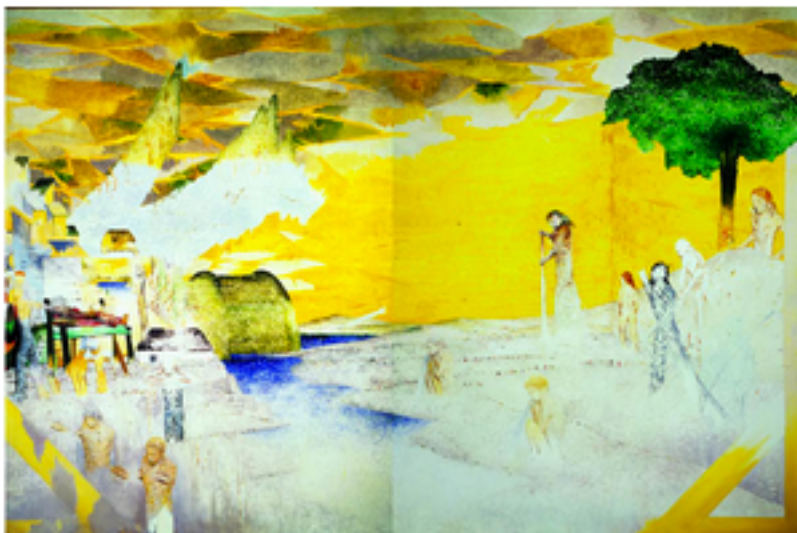
Rail: And you see that direct experience in Cliff Westermann and Leon Golub's work.

Petlin: Because they saw things.

Rail: Did they have any stylistic influence on you?

Petlin: Not directly. Cliff and Claes Oldenburg were in my class at the Art Institute. Cliff became the sculptor he became afterwards, not before, but Leon was already out there and Rosofsky and some of the others of that older generation, June Leaf and so forth were part of the group.

Rail: I didn't know that June Leaf was a part of this group.



Irving Petlin, *Revolution Pastoral*, (1978-81). Diptych:
Oil on canvas. Overall 108 × 168 in. / 274.4 × 426.72.
Courtesy Kent Fine Art.

Petlin: Oh, she was at the heart of it! I knew her work very early on because she was the girlfriend of Seymour Rosofsky who was a friend of mine. June was one of the core artists of the Chicago group coming out of WWII, in the post war years, the first generation of what unfortunately was called the “Monster Roster,” which is a terrible name. It was denigrating. This was not a Monster Roster, this was a socially conscious group of artists who were not in line with New York, with abstract expressionism, with Greenbergians evicting everything that was thoughtful from art to be replaced by surface, you know?

Rail: Well *nouveau imagiste* is a much more attractive name. Other than you, who else would you say fell under that category in your generation?

Petlin: Well there was Robert Barnes, there was Claes [Oldenburg] and there was Cliff [Westermann], there were several other wonderful artists who never flourished. Jim McGarrell was a little older, a year older, Robert Indiana was a year older but wasn't part of this group. And then following us was the Hairy Who people. You know, another completely different wave.

Rail: Right after the Art Institute of Chicago, that's when Josef Albers recruited you on scholarship for Yale. I know that Chicago is a huge chapter in your life, did you feel out of place in Connecticut?

Petlin: Yeah [*Laughter.*], I did. But I couldn't leave the country because I hadn't been in the army yet. I went to Yale with Albers and spent a very interesting time because it was so different from where I had come from. It opened me up to all the things of the East coast that I didn't know firsthand. And Albers, though we fought like cats and dogs, was a great teacher and a great connection to European art and painting.

Rail: And I know he respected your work.

Petlin: He did, even though he told people not to look at it [*Laughter.*]; he liked competition.

Rail: He used your work as an example for what everybody else had to work up to, right?

Petlin: Well my color work. But when he saw what I was doing in painting he would tell the students in the color lab, "class this is what you must compete against here, but please, don't look at his paintings..." We fought in the critiques, when he came to visit all the graduate students, but he liked opposition because it created the critical context that he wanted. But most of the students were followers, and although he liked that he didn't enjoy it in the same way; he liked a good fight. For example, he was very hard on Eva Hesse who was a year below our class...

Rail: And a later girlfriend of yours...

Petlin: [*Laughter.*] Yeah, a little bit. He was very hard on her.

Rail: Color has always been very important to you. Looking at these pastels from 2012, you can see a really developed, intuitive sense of color. The reds, yellows, and the bright blues hit you even harder than the colors in some of the paintings.

Petlin: Pastel communicates color in a different way. There's a crystalline nature of color in its relationship to the paper that is not present in painting. And it's dry, dry, dry, so it generates heat in itself. Light has heat. Light has temperature you might say. Pastel can give you all that possibility that doesn't exist in oil. Oil can be all kinds of things and I have used it in different ways, but the ultimate transmission of color comes in pastel.

Rail: How did you discover pastel?

Petlin: Very much by accident. I didn't know of pastel until maybe 1960. We planned this trip to the south of France and I had this tiny little tin can of a car and I wanted to take some materials with me to work. I thought well if I did some drawing in color I'd be happy, and I came upon the art store in Montparnasse where I saw these sticks of pastel that were so beautiful. I said "Sarah, I'll just take some of these and some paper and that'll be enough." And so, they were Maison de Pastel pastels, which happened to be the greatest pastel maker of all time. They were the pastels that Degas used, and Redon, and so forth.

Rail: The compositions in many of your pastels—and some paintings—are divided in horizontal layers of landscapes, signifying multiple places yet presented as one.

Petlin: I sometimes turn what would be, normally in a composition, the horizon with the sky into another place, so that the horizon leads into another landscape, not into the sky. Or the sky is a landscape, sometimes, in that sense. And some of them are really two worlds.

Rail: Do you think it comes from the feeling of being in multiple places or being from a family of immigrants?

Petlin: Perhaps. The idea of place, country, has always been a subtext in my work and the other land, which sometimes those horizons become, might be part of that syndrome. I mean, you are never in one place in your mind; you are always somewhere else. And if you reduce that to visual language it becomes another place, visually as well as mentally. So maybe that horizon which began another land comes out of this feeling.

Rail: I know you saw a lot of history painting, and I know you were involved with the attempt to remove *Guernica* (1937) from the MoMA. Why was that, again?

Petlin: What America was doing in Vietnam—bombarding helpless and defenseless civilian villages—is very similar to what the Germans did in Guernica. And the Art Workers Coalition decided to protest. We felt Picasso should be presented with a choice, but discreetly, with the possibility of him removing it, because it didn't belong at the Museum of Modern Art. It was on loan from Picasso. The idea was that I would very discreetly circulate a petition amongst the New York art world. Over 500 signatures were collected with no telephone calls, it was hand carried because everybody knew that sometimes one was, as I was, being listened to all through the Vietnam struggle.

So the idea was to get the petition to Picasso who was in the south of France, married to Jacqueline. I brought the package of signed petitions, and I asked people I knew how to get to Picasso quickly and easily. They said Michel Leiris, at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, would be the best one. And so I went to him and said, "Here are these petitions and this is the idea and I was told that you could facilitate my getting to see him." And he said "Oh, no, you couldn't go to see Picasso, he doesn't see people. But I will take them to him." And I gave the petitions to Michel Leiris, and he said, "I will get back to you within a week, I'm headed down there next week and I'll get back to you and tell you what Picasso thinks."

Well, I got a telephone call from Alfred Barr saying, "We know you have circulated a petition for Picasso to remove the *Guernica*. We think it's a terrible idea." He was one of the major figures of the Museum of Modern Art's development from the early days. I said, "How did you know?" He said, "It's been brought to our attention in any case and we're asking you not to do this, please don't do it, it would cause such a terrible..." and I said, "That's the whole point and I'm going to see Picasso."

But here's the reason: by asking for it to be removed the issue would become national. While it sat in the Museum of Modern Art thousands of people saw it, but it didn't mean anything in their own country.

Rail: So in a way you were asking Picasso to remove it so that people could understand the painting better.

Petlin: Yeah, and make it relevant.

Rail: I know that you were politically active in a lot of different locations. I'm curious about what the political and cultural climate was like in the artistic community that existed in the early 1960s when you were showing at the Galerie du Dragon.

Petlin: Well, in Europe it was about Algeria. And the Galerie du Dragon happened to be a magnet for the anti-war intellectuals of France at that time. The famous letter of French intellectuals, 142 writers, was drafted in the back room of the Galerie du Dragon. There was a café across the street, and Simone, love of Sartre, lived upstairs at 19 Rue du Dragon. Sartre visited her every day and he was a signer of that letter.

Rail: Simone de Beauvoir.

Petlin: Simone de Beauvoir. The Galerie du Dragon was the center of opposition to the war in Algeria and writers came there to sign the famous petition.

Rail: Was the director there at the time a political figure?

Petlin: Oh, yeah, very much, Max Clarac-Serou. Very, very left, son of railroad workers who were communists, he was a gascon from Gascony.

Rail: And how did you come to the Galerie du Dragon? Or did they find you?



Irving Petlin, *Hundred Fighting Men (II)*, (1962), Pastel on paper. 34 × 28 in./86.4 × 71.1 cm. Courtesy Kent Fine Art.

Petlin: They heard of me when I came to France on a Ryerson Fellowship. They knew of me through Allan Frumkin of the little group of Chicago artists. And Leon and Nancy were living in Paris at the time and I was in touch with them. And June Leaf was in Paris at that time. So, when Frumkin came he told Clarac about me and he came to see me, and immediately after that he told me, 'I'll give you a one-man show.' And that's how it started, I had four one-man shows one year after another with Clarac in Paris.

Rail: And that's where the *Hundred Fighting Men* was presented, which is one of my favorite series of yours. One of the toughest.

Petlin: It was done after the riots at Métro Charonne. Métro Charonne is where seven people were beaten to death.

Rail: This is something you witnessed firsthand?

Petlin: Yes, I was there. And I almost got killed myself, and the woman I had come with—a friend, the godmother of Alessandra, our daughter—Rachel Jacobs, the philosopher, she had been a student of Wittgenstein. She got her head broken, and we lost contact with each other in the melee, and I escaped through a café broken window, and she got taken to the hospital with a broken skull.

It was medieval because they blocked the subway entrances. People wanted to escape down the subways, but the police had planned it that way. They'd planned a bloody melee. In other words, they weren't using the normal

clubs. These were lead-filled clubs, so that when you heard them hit a head, it sounded like hitting a grapefruit. That crushing sound. They locked the subway entrances at Charonne. People wanted to flee from the police but they got trapped down there at the subway because the doors were all locked and the police followed them down there and were hitting people. They injured so many people and actually killed seven people. That's when the war in Algeria actually ended, that night. Because for the funerals that followed, the police had deserted Paris. They weren't even in the air in helicopters because they knew they weren't welcome in that city. Over a million people marched in that funeral procession holding gigantic pictures of the people who had been killed. You could hear a pin drop; there was not a sound. So, I decided to do the "fighting men" after Métro Charonne thing, and that was shown in Paris and sold out, immediately.

Rail: What do you think about the marches that have happened this year?

Petlin: I think the women have taken the lead, and I'm happy to see it!

Rail: Well, I think a lot of women felt personally violated... you said something very poignant in an essay or interview about the change in the American community and the American people from in the 1960s and 1970s to now. You said that the people today have been shut down, that people don't know how to get together in communities because of the icon of the individual.

Petlin: Mm-hmm. If you were a big-time person or a little-time person, you were on equal ground in the movement to end the Vietnam War. Everyone had to submerge their egos, artists especially, for the idea itself of ending the war. When Leon did something called the Napalm elegy, which really struck home, because Napalm was a symbol of Vietnam. As powerful as *And Babies* was, the Napalm elegies and the things that Rudolf Baranik and Leon did were really powerful images because they gave people the sense of what it would feel like to have phosphorus in gasoline that can't be put out by water, until it burns to the bone. It's an excruciating death, and we used it *everywhere*. And things like that allow people to feel together.

Rail: I'd like to know, how did you meet Meyer Schapiro? I know you made three portraits of him, and one of them is in the Jewish Museum. I know that he was a very important figure in your life, and a very good friend.

Petlin: He was our neighbor to start with, we lived on W 11th street and he lived on West 4th, just two minutes away, and we would see each other on the street often.

Rail: Is this the late 1960s?

Petlin: The late 1960s, and from then on. The last portrait I did of him was very shortly before he died, which I have kept. I have it in Paris. When Linda Nochlin would spend a summer month in our apartment, before she'd come she'd ask, "Would you please take the portrait of Meyer Schapiro out, because I really like to look at it while I'm there." She was a great admirer of Meyer. The portrait I have is the last one, where his skin is almost transparent, the one I want to keep. Because it's on paper, I don't like to have it out continuously.

Rail: Would he visit your studio frequently?

Petlin: No, we met at his house, or he would have dinner at our house. You know, Meyer Shapiro was a very modest creature, he didn't like adulation and was very much a mensch. Meyer to me was the embodiment of the critical mind looking at visual things, and knowing how to read and think through the arks that artists left—how they got there, why they got there, what the context was, what the historical reference was—he was the master. Even to have a little conversation with him, about anything, he would tell you something that you didn't know. Any artist that had contact him felt the same.

Rail: Another historian that you still are close with is Max Kozloff. How were you introduced?

Petlin: For one, we both come from Chicago. Max was a student at the University of Chicago, and I was a student the Art Institute. Max and I are almost the same age. He's about a year older than I am. And Max had come to the Art Institute to see the student shows a lot, but when he got a Fulbright, that's when I showed up with my Ryerson, and we looked each other up and bonded in Paris.

Rail: Did he do any studio visits with you?

Petlin: Oh, many. He did an article for this show. If America has a critical treasure alive today, it's Max Kozloff. That's what Kitaj felt, and many others in Europe who've read him feel the same way. And Max is doing a kind of a memoir now, and his brain is all there. What an incredible memory. He's also a painter, another one like Robert Storr, a kind of painter who led the field for history. Max is doing just these beautiful pictures right now. Everybody in the old days has one of two options; one is to remain creative and inventive, and the other is to drift into a kind of repetition. The really interesting people keep being inventive and touch new things.

Rail: What is the pastel work that you're doing now? Are they portraits?

Petlin: No, it's more of a landscape. The things that are at the Petit Palais in Paris—they're recent. All the most recent work, meaning the last two years, is in France right now, and they're all pastels. There's a show right now at the Petit Palais; they decided to show their collection of pastels, which they've never done before.

Rail: Now that I've been looking at your pastels and thinking about pastel, so many masters, like Redon, Manet, Degas, so many artists have used pastel, but I can't think of any younger contemporary artists who are using it.

Petlin: There's only a handful, or only a handful of interesting artists who are—let's say—fully committed to working in pastel today.

Rail: Why do you think that is?

Petlin: It's a very difficult medium. It's a risky medium because there's no going back. It's not like oil painting where you can erase and remove. Pastel has a risk in it, that when things get put down they can't really be taken away. If it's used for sketching it's fine. But if you're going to do a complete work in pastel—what I call a dry painting—it's a strategic enterprise. You have to plan, and the balance between planning and impulse. The hand hovers over the paper, and when it strikes it strikes because of impulse, not because of planning. And that balance between impulse and preparation is a kind of performance in itself. The making of it. But it's a performance that's personal; it's a true solo.

Rail: So many of your peers are textbook names. So many contemporary artists know of them. Why do you think that people don't know your work as well?

Petlin: [*Laughter.*] I don't know. First of all, I'm not a networker at all, and I've lived away from this country for a long time. The other thing is that when I left in 1990 it was because I felt the United States was entering into another period of continuous war with the Gulf War, I said, I've done everything I could in my life here, I have to get to work full time and do things that I couldn't do up until now. I thought we were going to be away for just a little bit, but it turns out we just never came back. But the answer to your question is a mystery to me, except for something Robert Storr said yesterday when we were meeting. He said that "your work requires an understanding of a lot of things—historical, contemporary—he said it's almost too much for people to want to translate. And it doesn't say what it is immediately."



Irving Petlin, *STORMS: Abandoned Forest (Broken Boat)*, (2012), Pastel on Handmade Paper. Triptych
Overall: 34 5/8 × 82 5/8 in. Courtesy Kent Fine Art.

Rail: If you know nothing, the pastels are just beautiful. I mean my theory has always been that your work has these subtle, but dangerous, political statements. People don't want to look at pictures about Vietnam, and I think America's still kind of embarrassed by that time. Perhaps the political choices you've made and that exist in the work, people still aren't ready to face them.

Petlin: It's possible. I have never rebelled against the notion that I'm not well known. It has never bothered me, and if it did I might have done something about it. I consider it more important to be working than to be thinking about things that have to do with becoming. I never had an impulse or an instinct for that. Other artists I know are just naturally fantastic at that, but I never had that instinct.

Rail: Maybe one more question. What advice would you give to a young artist who's trying to make an ethical or political impact with visual art?

Petlin: Visual images, or pictures, are more powerful than words. And if we could come up with another powerful image that can be interpreted by people who are either on the fence or who support the current swing in American politics to think about themselves differently, that would be the best thing that could happen. Robert Storr and I were talking about that just yesterday. He said that what you did with *And babies* was not to tell them what to think but to allow them to put two things together in their own minds. And that's the genius of a great political poster. He said if that could happen today, right now, that would be powerful because it works more so than words do, or explanations. Attacking Trump for example is useless, ridiculous. It just increases support for him among the same people who continue to support him. It's getting to them and letting them feel that they have been suckered, in some way deceived, that they don't have to continue to feel that way, and to allow them to come back. He said, don't write those people off. That has always been my idea, that we don't talk to *ourselves*, we talk to those out there who need to have a chance to come back to a rational life. And I am in touch now with Jon Hendricks again, and we're thinking of coming up with something that could work in this climate. It's very hard, harder than it was then, but we're going to be working on it in the next month. I'm going to be in Paris but we'll be communicating about that. We did it once before, we're going to try it again.

Contributor

Elyse Benenson

ELYSE BENENSON is a contributor to the Brooklyn Rail