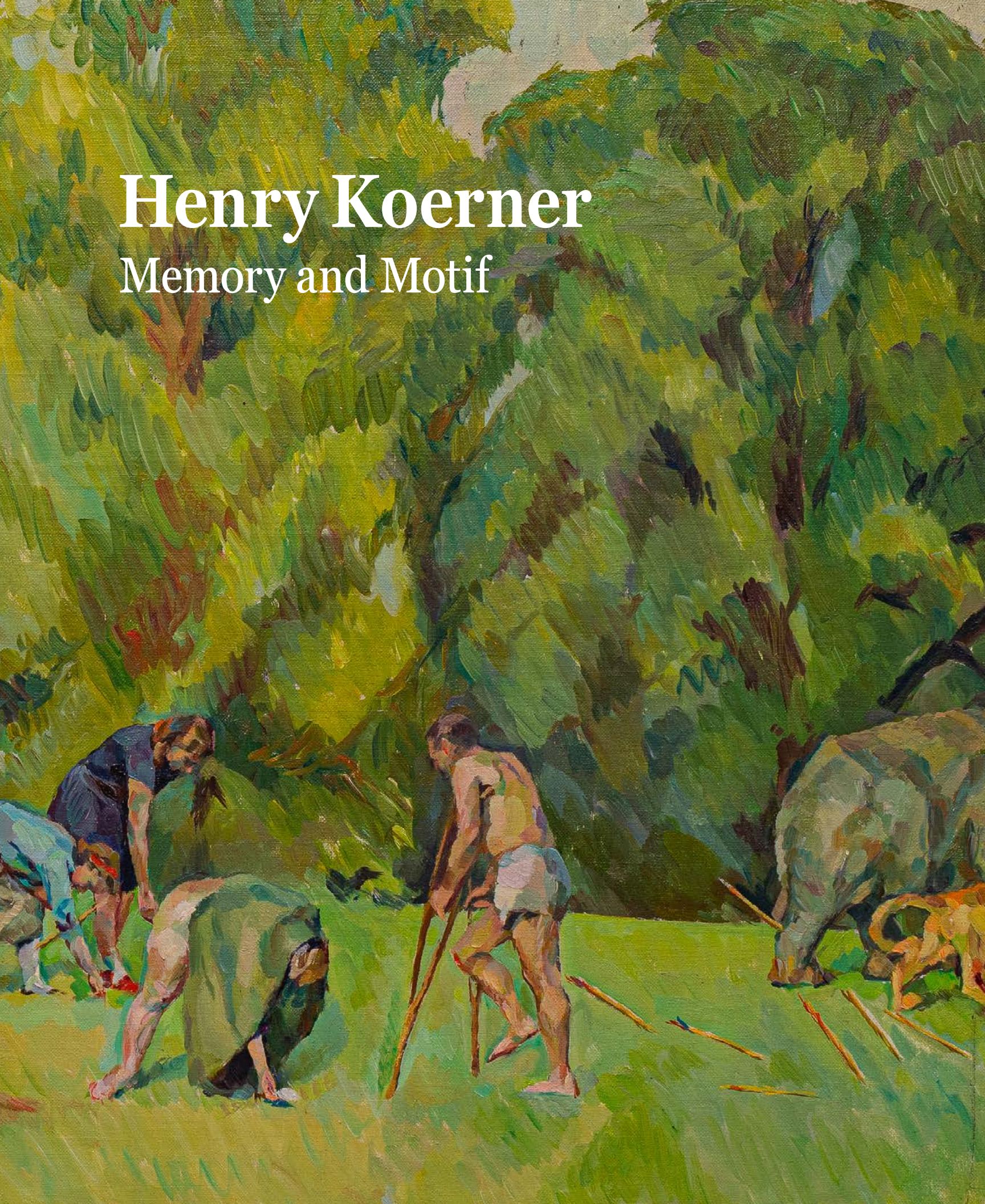


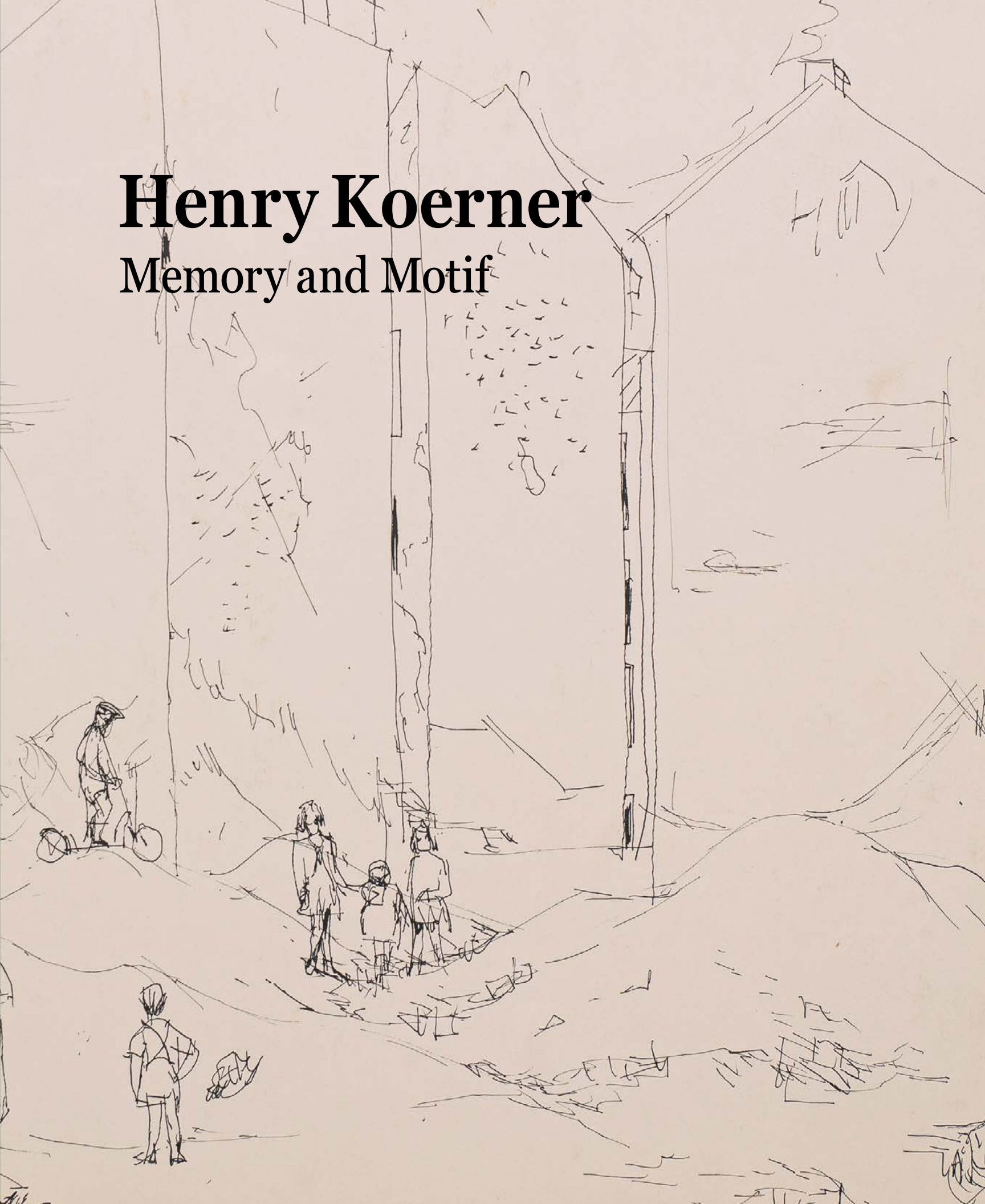
Henry Koerner

Memory and Motif



Henry Koerner

Memory and Motif



*This publication accompanies an exhibition at the
Yale Henry Koerner Center from April 20, 2023, to
June 20, 2023, one of three exhibitions on show during
the 2022–23 academic year to mark the twentieth
anniversary of the dedication of the center.*

Exhibition open by invitation or appointment;
call (203) 432-8227

Copyright © 2023 Yale Henry Koerner Center.
All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-218-15919-1

Contents

- 5 Acknowledgments
- 7 Introduction
Joseph Koerner
- 15 Visual Play
Paul Fry
- 23 No Erasures
Jonathan Weinberg
- 31 Exhibition Checklist
- 33 Works on Display



Stanley Kubrick, *Henry Koerner in His New York Studio*, 1949

Acknowledgments

The Henry Koerner Center for Emeritus Faculty was dedicated on April 21, 2003, under the directorship of Bernard Lytton '71 MAH, Donald Guthrie Professor Emeritus of Surgery. Professor Lytton died on October 14, 2022; he was ninety-six. Our founding director served for the first decade, creating an emeritus faculty community along with most of the programs, policies, and traditions that continue. Thus we choose to dedicate this twentieth-anniversary exhibition of works by our namesake, to our emeritus director, Bernard Lytton.

First and foremost, we acknowledge Joseph Koerner, who took the opportunity of our twentieth-anniversary exhibition to make a gift to the Koerner Center of twenty-nine artworks by his father, Henry Koerner. We also thank him for his catalogue introduction to our exhibition, and for all the time he has given me and both Paul Fry and Jonathan Weinberg, who have contributed essays on Henry Koerner's art and on our exhibition in particular. A special thanks to Stephanie Wiles and Mark Mitchell, Yale University Art Gallery, for responding positively to our very tardy loan request for *Tunnel of Love*. We, of course, also acknowledge the production staff of the Office of the University Printer: John Gambell, university printer; Maura Gianakos, project manager; and Sidney Hirschman, designer. We thank David Baker for copyediting and Matthew Fried for photography for the exhibition catalogue.

Gary L. Haller

Director

Yale Henry Koerner Center for Emeritus Faculty

February 23, 2023

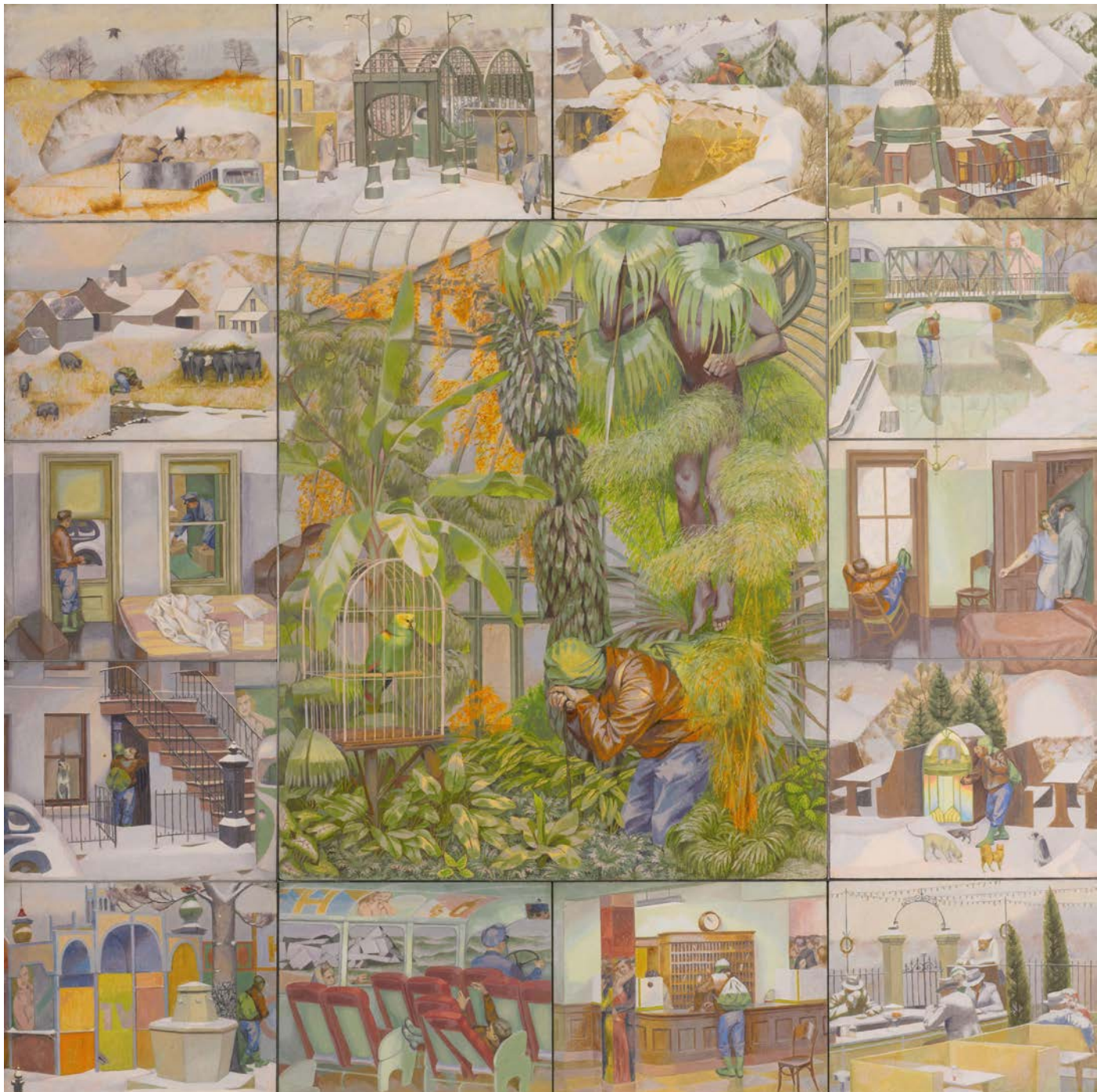


Fig. 1 *The Winter Journey*, 1951–52, oil on masonite, 80 × 80 in. Private collection

Introduction

Joseph Koerner

Returning to the United States in 1947, my father went twice by Greyhound coast to coast. The route took him through Pittsburgh, where he would settle in 1953, following a year spent as artist-in-residence at Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University). He knew the city's hills, rivers, bridges, inclines, and mills from Walker Evans's marvelous photographs, which he had seen in New York before the war. He got off the bus, checked into a downtown hotel, and spent days sketching steel works from elevations above the Monongahela. Then he left for Chattanooga in search of rural motifs—a pond with bathers, a rose arbor, pigs on a hillside (*Three Pigs Posing*, p. 49)—before traveling on, via the farmlands of Nebraska and the mountains around Denver, to San Francisco. He wanted his trip to be mostly about travel itself, and about images that meet the eye in transit. This was partly because in New York, where he lived and showed his work (chiefly at Midtown Galleries), realist painting of his kind was increasingly rubbished by the critical establishment, and he wanted a change. While on the bus he also conceived his most ambitious work to date, a multipaneled painting titled *The Winter Journey* that follows a traveler riding cross country by bus (fig. 1). Fourteen views of snowy landscapes and lonely hotel interiors wreath a cryptic center: in a glazed botanical garden (Pittsburgh's Phipps Conservatory) the wanderer, faceless as always, leans on his staff while a sculpted spear bearer peaks from lush foliage behind.

My father adored Schubert's *Winterreise*. A reasonably talented tenor, he had busked his way through Italy as a teenager singing German lieder, Italian arias, and popular American songs, with his friend playing guitar and passing the hat. The

opening line of Schubert's song cycle—"A stranger I arrived, a stranger I depart"—fit his bus trips, and it applied to his condition as refugee from Vienna, where the song was written. When in later years he would sing that opening line, now with me playing the wanderer's footsteps in minor chords on the piano and our friends in Pittsburgh as audience, he sometimes began to weep. This he did openly and unembarrassed, but to everyone else's surprise, as he was otherwise of a boisterous disposition, and unusual to others only because of his extravagant opinion about his own art (he considered himself the greatest painter of the age) and his lavish use, when speaking English, of obscenities. Something about singing "Gute Nacht," perhaps about singing it with me (soon to leave for college) playing Schubert's piano "accompaniment" that only magnifies the voice's solitude: something touched him to the core. And because he believed art should do precisely that, dig to the very depths of human experience, his tears flowed copiously, making listeners feel awkward and inadequate.

For the wanderer in *The Winter Journey* he used a professional model—he made few self-portraits, being interested in windows, not mirrors, and loathing that commonplace of painters' practice: the studio. One of the drawings now at Yale shows the protagonist with his back turned to us, like one of Caspar David Friedrich's turned-away wanderers (*Study for "The Winter Journey,"* p. 49). Executed in pen and ink and colored pencil, this little sketch could be an emblem for the other works gathered in the exhibition. All derive from, and map points along the journey of, my father's motion between worlds. My father was born in 1915 to Jewish parents

in the Leopoldstadt district of Vienna. Like so many assimilated Viennese Jews, his family was unob-servant. They never went to synagogue, celebrated Christmas rather than Hanukah, and had as their closest friend a church-going Catholic—an insufferably haughty spinster whom we children were forced to call, out of deference to her familial connection, “Aunt Steffi.” My father’s great-great grandfather Simon Körner had moved to Vienna (from a nearby town in southern Moravia) by the 1840s, so that side of the family felt at home in the city. My father’s mother hailed from Stryi, near Lviv (then Lemberg) in Galicia, but her ancestors, who owned small oil mines around Boryslav, moved back and forth between Vienna and Galicia.

As a child, my father was, by his own description, hopeless in school (he went to a Realgymnasium specializing in math and science), uninterested in politics, good at drawing, and the apple of his mother’s eye. When he failed to get into engineering school, he enrolled in Vienna’s School of Applied Art, where he found a calling as a graphic designer. But on March 13, 1938, Hitler marched into Vienna and a day later my father lined up at the U.S. embassy hoping to secure a visa to emigrate. In August 1938, still without a visa, he managed to board a plane to Milan and (after arguing his way through customs) enter Italy.

The show includes a rare drawing from this period. Made on the letterhead of the firm Adolf Sachter, with offices in Vienna, Bucharest, and Chernivtsi, it records people seated at a table at a restaurant either in Milan or in Venice (*Four Men at Table*, p. 34). The drawing style is mannered, as in the other sheets in the meager portfolio my father brought with him from Vienna, but the letterhead is a relic of his travels, and the focus on everyday life predicts better sketches he would make during the war. It took nine months for his visa to come

through—an uncle in Brooklyn had been slow in providing the affidavit for immigration to the U.S. Arriving in New York, he soon found employment at Maxwell Bauer Studios, a reputable design firm in Manhattan, and within a few years he would win prizes in national poster competitions. This success brought him to the Office of War Information, the army’s civilian intelligence and propaganda agency. Enlisted in the army in 1944, he entered the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor to the C.I.A. Challenged by Ben Shahn (a fellow artist in the Office of War Information) to try to paint—Shahn whispered to my father while he was airbrushing a poster design, “Can’t you paint anything, Henry?”—he created in 1943 a painting titled *My Parents I* (fig. 2). Portraying his mother and father safe in their apartment in Leopoldstadt, but imbued with foreboding, the picture garnered praise from co-workers. When the army shipped him to Europe, he began to draw obsessively.

Two sketches, again on letterhead, document this shift from graphic designer to artist. Made in Fort Belvoir, where my father did his basic training, they capture his “buddy” (as he called him when describing his army experience to me) in casual moments: writing a letter home, or standing idly about (*Writing (U.S. Army)*, p. 35; *Soldier (U.S. Army)*, p. 36). Others on the same paper stock show soldiers on the toilet and in the shower—mischievous drawings, I imagine, made partly to tease their subjects. On board the ship that would take him to England, his drawings become more serious (*Sitting on Deck Chairs (U.S. Army)*, p. 37), capturing human subjects in ordinary pursuits along with their surroundings and treating the sheet of tissue paper as a formal whole, in anticipation of the paintings that would derive from such drawings. In London he filled pad after tissue-paper pad with sketches, while also

completing small gouaches, including one documenting Germany's surrender (*Germany Surrenders*, p. 38). By May 1945 he had joined the entourage of General Lucius Clay, first in Wiesbaden, then in Berlin, and, observing war-torn Germany and (I assume) encountering scenes close to those of his

Viennese childhood, his sketches gain familiarity with their subjects. A waiter balancing a serving of coffee on his tray (p. 39) looks like a formidable *Oberkellner* in one of Vienna's illustrious cafés, but these drawings also glimpse life in the rubble of the ruined German capital.



Fig. 2 *My Parents I*, 1943, egg tempera on masonite, 25 ½ × 24 ½ in. Private collection

Late in 1945 the army called my father to Nuremberg to record the War Crimes Tribunal beginning there. He sketched the accused in the same manner and the same notebooks as he did the Berlin waiter. If memory serves me correctly, he came down with shingles and was furloughed, enabling him—in the first months of 1946—to return by train to Vienna. Having served in the O.S.S., he would have known early on the fate of Viennese Jews, but the trip there confirmed what he suspected: his mother, father, brother, aunts, and uncles, indeed his entire extended family except for two distant cousins, had been murdered by the Nazis, many of them in the extermination camp at Maly Trostinets, near Minsk.

Rather than returning to the U.S., my father resolved to join the U.S. Military Government in Berlin, working there again as graphic designer, but spending most of his time painting the group of pictures that established his fame. These would be dubbed “Magical Realist” by critics in New York, but for my father they were simply realistic. Their magic, or surrealism, was simply that of human lives as glimpsed in the rubble of Berlin. True, my father took the motifs he sketched from life on tissue paper and worked these up in gouache before constructing his painted tableaux. One titled *Lebensspiegel* in German and *Vanity Fair* in English (p. 45) depends on scores of drawings and studies. (The Whitney, which owns the work, insists on calling it *Mirror of Life*, despite all its sketches being labeled “Study for Vanity Fair.”) At the core of this group of works stood *My Parents II* (1946) (fig. 3), the public sequel to the originally private *My Parents I*—the latter had been painted from memory before he was certain of his parents’ fate. After a neighbor in Vienna confirmed that his mother and father had been transported from Vienna to their deaths, he rushed up into the Vienna Woods to mourn. There in the leafless forest he vowed he would paint a memorial

for them. At Yale, *My Parents II* is represented by a gouache sketch and a 1971 linocut (figs. 6 and 11).

On March 30, 1947, fifty-five of my father’s drawings and paintings went on display at the Haus am Waldsee. The curators were mostly Americans serving in OMGUS’s Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Section—the famous “Monuments Men” charged mainly with recovering artworks stolen by the Nazis. In the first months after the war ended, the United States had been most concerned with denazification. The aim, so a report made by the O.W.I. in 1944, was “to make them [the German populace] realize they are guilty.” The most famous instances of this strategy were the twenty-four or so “confrontation visits,” in which American field commanders forced Germans living in the vicinity of concentration camps to tour the sites. But by June 1945, American and British intelligence communities grew concerned about the wisdom of this approach, particularly in light of Soviet propaganda, which cunningly shifted the blame for Nazi atrocities from the German people to big business, monopoly capitalism, and Western imperialism. U.S. policy therefore shifted to winning German hearts and minds in the hopes of reestablishing a strong constitutional democracy and containing Soviet expansion. This new approach placed an emphasis on visual propaganda, mostly in the form of films, but also through painting, photography, and the graphic arts.

My father’s 1947 show belonged to this endeavor. The first exhibition of American modern art in postwar Germany, it remained a singularity: the next exhibition at Haus am Waldsee showed American children’s drawings, and OMGUS never again sponsored modern art in this way. To gauge public opinion of the show, and to peer into the minds of Germans of the time, the organizers created a questionnaire, with eleven questions prefaced by a paragraph stating that responses were not mandatory and could be done anonymously and at home: “Don’t



Fig. 3 *My Parents II*, 1946, oil on masonite, 30 × 25 in. Myron Kunitz Collection of American Art, Minneapolis, MN. Photo: Minneapolis Institute of Art

be afraid! This questionnaire is not a questionnaire.” Germans were used to questionnaires inquiring about affiliations with the Nazi party. By filling out such forms, many Germans hoped for clearance certificates—*Persilscheine*, as they were nicknamed, after the Persil brand of laundry detergent. Only 14 percent of the 1,500 visitors to my father’s exhibition completed the form. Some respondents said that they went to the show to see modern American art but left with an impression that the artist was not at all a typical American. To the penultimate question, “Do you believe the painter intended to cause an emotional shock in the viewer?,” the answers were mixed. Some praised the artist’s honesty; others

objected to his bleak outlook. One complained that whoever the painter was, he portrayed the Germans as an outsider and had not experienced all that Germans had had to live through. Many of the works on display clearly referenced the disasters of war, and one or two clearly gestured obliquely to the Holocaust: *My Parents II* could be anyone’s parents remembered in an attitude of mourning. In this, though, the exhibition was unique: it was the only art show sponsored by the U.S. military government that concerned recent German history, and it would be decades before Holocaust-related art would be shown in Germany in such a prominent way.

The exhibition was a critical success. German

newspapers compared my father's satirical fantasy to Bosch and Bruegel. American magazines picked up on the exhibition and the artist's unusual story, paving the way for successful shows in New York in 1947 and 1948. *Life* magazine reported that the show "created a sensation in Germany." *Time* magazine's chief critic, Alexander Eliot, called Koerner's paintings "the best to date to have come out of the aftermath of the war." Eliot praised the painter as "the find of the year" and predicted for him a brilliant career. Two reviewers for *Art Digest* were more critical, one (in 1947) objecting to the painter's "hysterical I-told-you-so" attitude, the other (in 1948) advising him to get over his "savage bitterness." Such bitterness, the latter conceded, was understandable, given the painter's personal circumstances. His entire family had after all been murdered by the Nazis, so of course he had some harsh feelings. But—so the implications—a whole two years had passed, and it was time to paint happy pictures, or better: action paintings



Fig. 4 Detail from *Amusement Park*, 1948

and abstractions that made memories disappear. Call it filial piety, but the "I-told-you-so" critique astonished me when I read it back in 1983, quoted in the catalogue of a retrospective exhibition of my father's work. And it astonishes me even more today, after three decades of high-profile global art focused almost singularly on history, trauma, and identity.

But I also recognize that my father's pictures remain in crucial ways opaque. Their outlier status increased when he changed his style from the meticulously finished manner of his Berlin and early New York works—including Yale University Art Gallery's *Tunnel of Love*, for which the Henry Koerner Center now has the original pen-and-ink drawing (fig. 4 *Amusement Park*, also see p. 46)—to a new, quasi-Impressionist style. In this new approach, brushstrokes became not only visible, as discrete daubs of paint, in colors sometimes seeming at odds with the object they represent; these oil or watercolor marks formed a structure more salient to the picture than the structure of the painted subject or view. My father called this departure "breaking the paint barrier." It involved careful study of Paul Cézanne and an agonistic relation to Abstract Expressionism, but it was undertaken, crucially, in the year following *The Winter Journey*, during his artist-in-residency at Pennsylvania College for Women, apart from, and ultimately as a farewell to, the artworld of New York (*PCW Hockey Field*, p. 50) Working en plein air, and always directly from life, with not a single brushstroke or pen line done from memory, photographs, or the imagination, he made Pittsburgh his studio. His drawings now had to be as complete and large as his paintings (*Children in Empty Lot*, p. 52), and his paintings, rather than inventing or composing their subjects from previous sketches and studies, had to find their motifs immediately, out in the real world where they were made (*Man with Zither* (Peter Kreuzberger), p. 66). For

my father the most precious mystery of all was the motif. He would say that word, “motif,” with reverence and, in inflated moments, he claimed they were sent directly to him by God—his God, by the way, was not a benign deity but a terrifying power that blessed and cursed inscrutably. *The Winter Journey* had pictured this hunt for motifs—the French word *motif* comes from Latin *motivus*, meaning “moving, impelling,” but with a presumed root, interestingly, in Proto-Indo-European *meue*, meaning “to push away.”

No longer memories in the guise of unquiet experiences, my father’s motifs after 1952 became unexpected arrivals in the present of the future. A quintessential modern American city, Pittsburgh in the 1950s seemed to be chock-full of these. He reveled in the brutal emergence of the urban environment, how new highways cut through the slope of the North Side, with a tin-roofed church (its onion-shaped cupola painted green, to imitate copper) peaking above the mud; and how roads in this city led not to picturesque ruins, chapels, and lookout towers, as roads did in Vienna, but to water towers and billboards (*The Water Tower*, p. 56; fig. 5, *Cowboy Over Pittsburgh, No. 1*, also see p. 58; *Road Construction in Sharpsburg*, p. 53). Observed with ecstatic affection, three houses across the street from the apartment where he and my mother settled in 1953—she had been a violin student at P.C.W. and was pregnant with my sister at the time—became as meaningful to him as had been the ruined façade of his erstwhile Vienna home (*Three Houses, Murray Hill Avenue*, p. 51). Granted, Pittsburgh appealed to him because, in his eyes and through the process of painting it, it resembled Vienna: the turbulent shapes of the steel mills looked like baroque palaces and churches, the steep hills of the South Side and the vistas from them of Pittsburgh’s three rivers recollected the Wienerwald and the famous

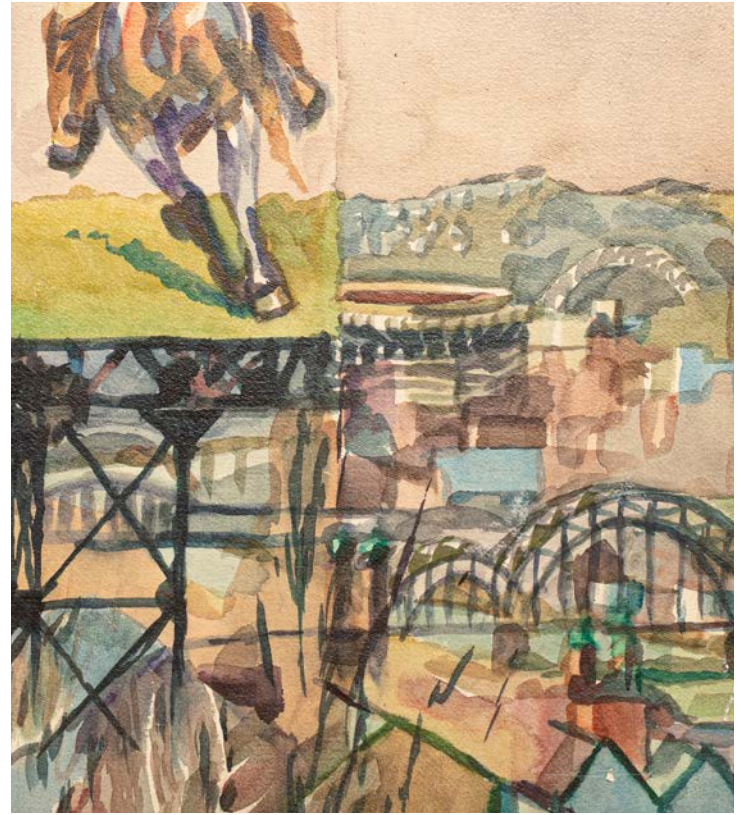


Fig. 5 Detail from *Cowboy Over Pittsburgh, No. 1*, c. 1975

“Wien-Blick” from Kahlenberg, and the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers could, with a bit of imagination, conjure the Danube, Danube Canal, and Wienfluss. It was Pittsburgh’s beauty that he felt he, alone among painters, could capture with full-throated ease.

And it was Pittsburgh that enabled him to return to Vienna to paint. This he did tentatively in 1956, when my sister was just two. He returned again in 1960, when I was a baby, still tentatively, with America his principal subject (*George and the Dragon*, p. 54). But by the mid-1960s the trips became a way of life as he began to spend every summer, from early May to late September, in Leopoldstadt, always with us, his family, in tow. Now he could depict his past in the saturated colors of the present, sometimes painting his foregrounds in Pittsburgh and his backgrounds in Vienna. This

constant back-and-forth between these worlds made him aware that the forking paths of *My Parents II* were (as Borges wrote) “an enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time.” My father’s patrons, all of them American, since he never once tried to sell his work in Austria, took his paintings of Vienna to be of places in or around Pittsburgh, or wherever they, the patron, happen to be born. After some puzzlement they would identify, say, the ancient Cistercian abbey of Heiligenkreuz, along the Via Sacra from Vienna to the pilgrimage church of Mariazell, to be “the Mellon Bank across from the Dairy Queen, in Monroeville, just off Route 22.” My father enjoyed these misprisions because they helped sell his work, and because he painted and loved a Dairy Queen and Stift Heiligenkreuz equally. “This *is* great beauty!” he once screamed at people watching him paint a colossal car graveyard along the Ohio River. “And I’m excited by it, because most people just pass by, and they don’t even want to look at it. Do you understand?”

As a child I understood that my father’s motifs motivated dramatically divergent interpretations. Of these interpretations, my father’s were the least satisfactory, built, as they randomly tended to be, on something someone else had said that appealed to him. My friends, when they visited our paintings-filled home, had intriguing readings of his work. Like me, they were sometimes asked to pose for him, and posing (in a strange costume or position within an enigmatic tableau) made one wonder what one was posing as. But no one’s analysis ever stuck, and the pictures grew more mysterious with time. At least, when I arrived at Yale in 1976, I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to study interpretation itself, and with Deconstruction and so-called Higher Criticism at its peak, interpretation could be studied and pursued no more deeply than at Yale. But it took me some years before I started to

interpret works of art, since of all the kinds of people who visited our home in Pittsburgh, from doctors and lawyers to plumbers and television repairmen, it was the art historians who had the least to say and who infused whatever they managed to say with the deepest condescension.

My father imagined that his paintings would end up in museums, and some of them have. Yale University Art Gallery acquired an important early work, *Tunnel of Love* (p. 47), from a Pittsburgh collector. But their first station was generally someone’s home. Like Dutch genre paintings, my father’s paintings and drawings were made for, and sometimes depict, a domestic setting. They are homely—sometime in an unhomely way—paintings about the home. I still receive e-mails from confused descendants of my father’s patrons asking what a picture they’ve inherited was meant to depict. Sometimes the answer is simple. “Oh, the old lady with the wild boars! She was this tiny old woman, not five foot tall, who visited a wildlife park outside Vienna. She’d feed bread to the pigs every day. We called her the Pig Lady because she would stir the animals into a frenzy with the bread, then yell ‘Don’t be greedy’ and clobber them on their snouts with a big stick. Some of these boars were huge, the size of bears. But she was fearless.” But these answers don’t satisfy. “Why paint that?” is a common follow-up. “That would take a long, long time,” I reply. “It has to do with something familiar being strange or uncanny, the Pig Lady expressing something violent in Vienna’s past”—at which point I lose my audience. The hope is that at Yale these pictures will give people at the Henry Koerner Center something to think about. They are “thought pictures” deposited for posterity from someone’s winter journey and have found a home here.

Joseph Leo Koerner

Visual Play

Paul Fry

With Tom Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt* on our minds, it is yet more fitting that we celebrate Henry Koerner on this the twentieth anniversary of the Koerner Center. Leopoldstadt is the Viennese community where Koerner was born, and that is where he needed to return—in his case right after the war—to confirm what he had long suspected but in some measure winced away from, the death of his whole family at the hands of the Nazis. The Stoppard and Koerner stories are similar: the artist's escape and survivor guilt—and the need to live at least a little more comfortably, through the exorcism of art, with the saving turn Koerner had been able to make at a forking path of history.

The sketch in our exhibit for *Study for My Parents No. 2* (fig. 6, also see p. 41) is an even darker part of Koerner's struggle than the well-known finished work. For one thing, the locket that hangs in the foreground of the painting, pledge of his continuing connection to the family home and his parents' possessions, is missing from our sketch. The forking path itself is the focus of the sketch, with its grim acknowledgment that history has driven his parents too, not just him, into the solitary estrangement of their fate. The tree trunks everywhere are as much prison bars as they are the forest of despair and the palings of fences and gates like the ones we see in *Augarten Gate with Operation* (p. 67)—even while they are also, as they stubbornly remain in the hands of a realist, just tree trunks. This is all true of the woodcut in the show, too, but the locket is in that one, and very prominent, perhaps in keeping with its 1971 dedication to his son Joseph—and one notices too, in keeping with the painting, that a distant meeting point for the two paths is held out as a possibility.

Solitude in the face of death may seem a curious theme for an artist whose scenes are so often teeming with life, affording life's many opportunities for satire, comic relief, and fantasy, as in the Bosch and Bruegel, about whom his son Joseph has written; yet in everything Koerner paints, the shadowing of solitude, haunted by the knowledge that we die alone, is plainly the condition of existence. The offsetting factor that dispels the gloom of loneliness in all his art, as often in Bruegel, is *play*. The sleight of hand in his visual art, both in theme and artistic virtuosity, finds its equivalent in *the play on words* that is sometimes a part of literary art. Before noticing the cards and board games, the Ferris wheels with their Coney Island surround, the race tracks, and the sports arenas, we can discover an instance of the way Koerner confronts verbal art in the sketch in our exhibit for his late, vast, and phantasmagoric picture of sixteen panels called *Moby Dick* (fig. 7). The painting itself is remarkable: in the foreground there is a game of chess being



Fig. 6 *Study for My Parents No. 2*, 1946



Fig. 7 *Moby Dick*, 1977–78, oil on masonite, 72 × 84 in. Private collection.

played with those large pieces to be moved over squares on the ground that one finds in parks (many of the pieces are also people in this painting; they are at stake in the game), and behind that there is the whale on dry land, *off*-white and in fact a right whale, not a sperm whale, while behind that and rising up, amid and in front of the dense foliage Koerner loves, we see a tower with a winding stair and figures suspended in air as if flying from a trapeze. Our sketch is for the panel at the lower left corner of the painting: it is the young man in shorts wearing a death mask and playing chess, in the painting, with a young woman in a bikini who is bent over to pick up a piece, like so many foraging Koerner figures out of *The Gleaners* (in fields as in *PCW Hockey Field*, in wartime rubble as in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, fig. 8). The painting plays on Melville's novel precisely by refusing to illustrate it, even as it links itself with the novel through a relay of associations that keeps before us the annihilation of all but Ishmael—an awareness radiating outward in Koerner from the premonitory death mask worn by a jaunty youth who will remove pieces one by one from the board.

To take another example of word play intertwined with image play: In the wonderful *Mort in His Library* (p. 55), all seems serene and contented, at least if we suppose Mort not to be perturbed at the danger of immersion in all his loose books and papers—he is awash in words, one might say, including the “CLE” of a journal cover peeping out (it may be the *Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle*)—but there is one odd intrusion in a work that seems otherwise not to involve magic realist fantasy. Four birds are flying about with no visible means of the support they would have if they were stuffed or crafted. I think an allusion to Poe's raven would be a mistake on our part, though it's hard to keep away from it, and the fact that these birds are too small to be ravens (and not black enough) could admittedly be in keeping

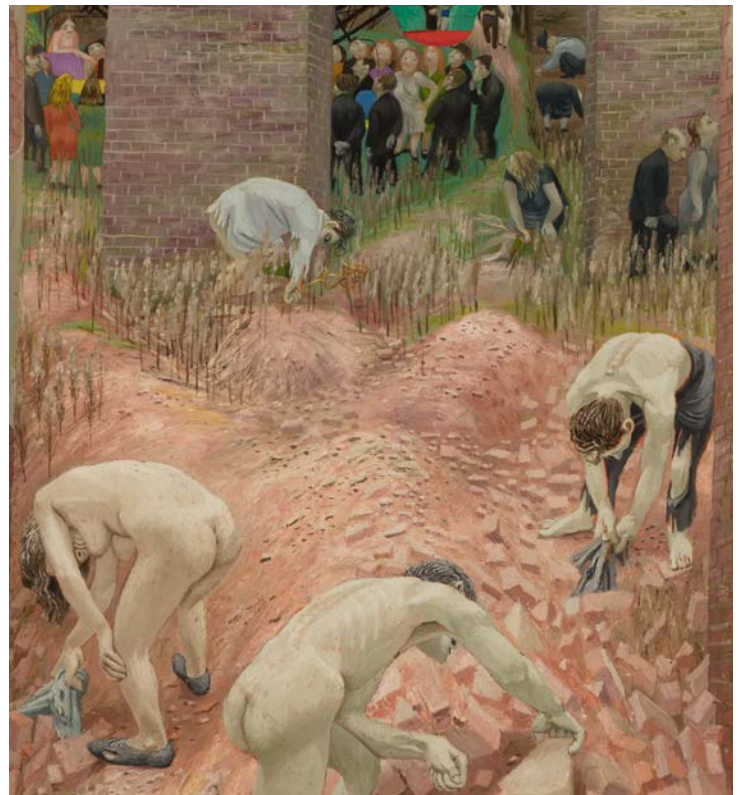


Fig. 8 Detail from *The Skin of Our Teeth*, 1946–47, oil on masonite, 35 ½ × 44 in. Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust, H-277.1948

with Koerner's mediievally inspired decision, here and elsewhere, to determine his figures' sizes by their importance and not by perspective.

Yet I suspect word play here takes us in another direction. Mort is pulling on his pipe and has a far-away look in his eye. In the German idiom, *Der hat einen Vogel (im Kopf)* is usually unspoken), equivalent more or less to our (he has) bats in the belfry or bees in his bonnet. Mort has not just one bird, someone so well read would scarcely have just one fixed idea; he has four, and of course they are not in his head, they are flying about inspiring song, perhaps a writing project. Mort's great virtue, his charm, is that by this means he is rendered as one who is slightly cuckoo. There is a painting too that can be referred to: Edouard Vuillard's portrait of Théodore Duret in his study with his cat Lulu on his lap. Duret was



Fig. 9 Detail from *Augarten Gate with Operation*, 1990

one of the earliest supporters of Impressionism, the style to which Koerner turned by way of Cézanne after 1952–53. Like Mort, Duret was a great reader, with a similarly depicted stack of MSS. to his right, and Lulu is the cat that might swallow those birds—even though they are not canaries any more than they are ravens.

Another such oblique play on words, or idiom, possibly governs the very strange object in the air of *Augarten Gate with Operation* (fig. 9, also see p. 67), seemingly thrown up like a football by the two healthy young persons standing among the patients in their hospital gowns, the orderlies, and the park groundskeepers. The occasion of this painting, Joseph Koerner has kindly informed me and as the title may suggest more vaguely, was the artist's triple-bypass heart surgery. But what is this object? Its top looks like the upper jaw of a devouring animal, but the rest of its mainly orange surface would seem to be the heart of one of the patients below. And what this heart apparently contains, between the "jaw" and the body, is a human head topped with black hair, eyes, and mouth prominent. *My mouth was in my heart!* This Viennese landmark, the Augarten, where one can just barely imagine hospital patients being taken for an outing, seems pleasant enough within, apart from the surgery being performed behind the fence palings, but is here fronted by those formidable bars with their spikes. Seated incongruously among those bars (how did anyone get there without being impaled?) are two other young people dressed almost the same as the ball-players below, their arms also raised but in the form of a congratulatory high-five or—to avoid anachronism—game of patty-cake. Look at us, they say, and look at how we escaped surgery! People have sweeping, free-floating visions under anesthetic (at least I had one as a child during a tonsillectomy), releasing the body, especially the organ being

impaled, from its pinned-down condition, and this may be one of those visions.

Fierce animals like the one that clamps down on that head are part of Koerner's menagerie. In *PCW Hockey Field* (p. 50) one sees to the right the backside of a lion walking out of the frame next to the disappearing backside of an elephant, and the only person not bent over is on crutches after an apparent leg injury. The lion? Hockey? Koerner liked American sports, and that may go some way towards explaining the startling watercolor *Cowboy Over Pittsburgh, No. 1* (p. 59), featuring the cityscape he painted so skillfully and with such affection. Possibly the cowboy reflects Koerner's vacation trips to Colorado, the abrupt sealing off of the framed upper left-hand figure being a way of saying you can bring back an image of the West but would never wish to absorb it into this Eastern steel town. But that upper left-hand frame could also be a billboard. Unlike many other cityscape experts, Koerner liked billboards in his urban aesthetic, and it could be that

Pittsburgh is being watched over by the Marlboro Man. This square is not painted like a billboard, as of course it could have been, but its more arbitrary connection with what is below it may bring out the theme of being overseen, governed from above, that animated the discourse about billboards and the advertising component of media theory more generally in Koerner's time. The Marlboro Man was considered a prime exemplar of media influence, and his horse—as though he were a centaur—increased his animal magnetism.

No animal so fierce as a dragon, and that is what we confront in *George and the Dragon* (fig. 10, also see p. 54). But what a dragon! It's huge, unlike the dragons traditionally speared by St. George almost under the rampant horses' hooves, and even more unlike the puny monster in Ingres's bizarre *Ruggiero Rescuing Angelica*. Yet Koerner's beast is not alive. It has the blind painted face of a festive New Year dragon and appears to be fixed in its seat, a plaster monster on a carousel circling past the altogether

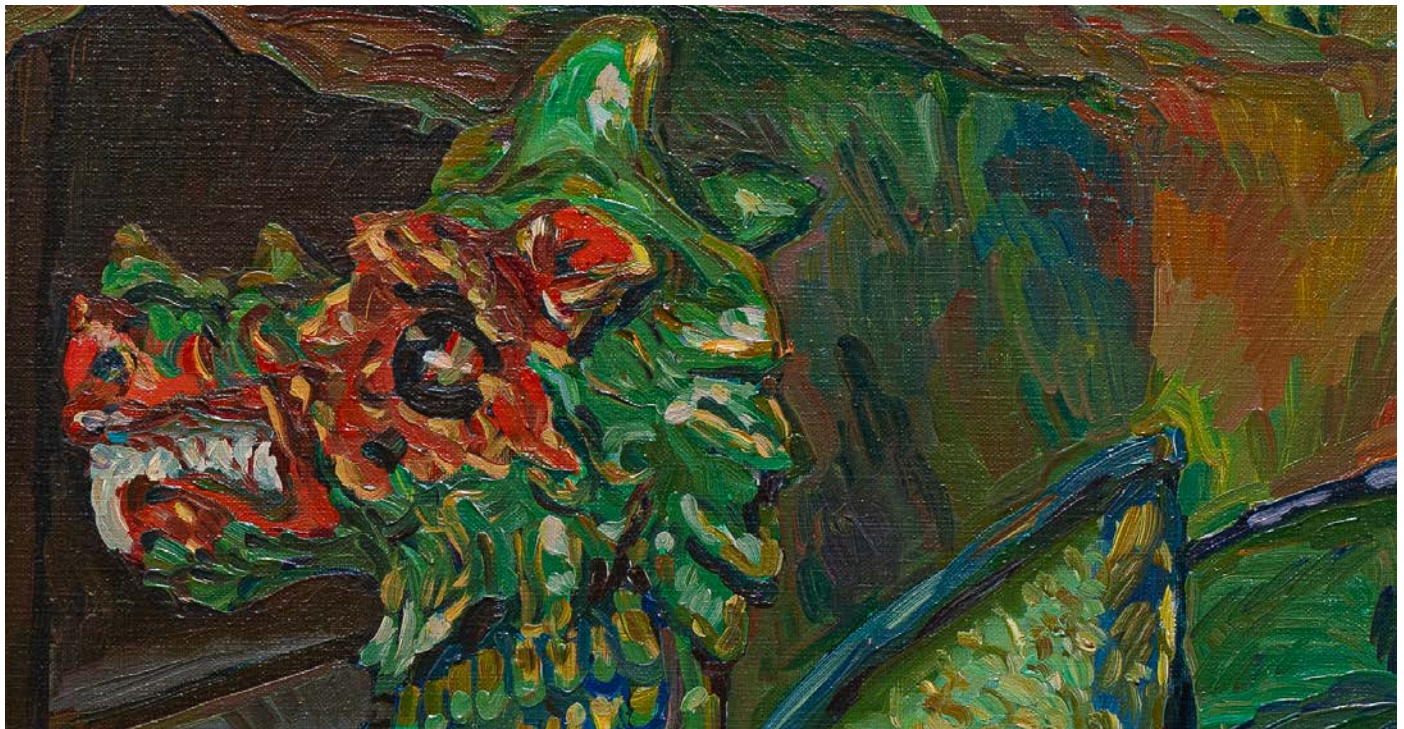


Fig. 10 Detail from *George and the Dragon*, 1964

ordinary man in late middle age, his name decidedly not *Saint George*, who pays little or no attention to the dragon despite its muzzle being pointed right at him. Both carousel and man are placed at the mouth of a cave, certainly bespeaking a remote past suggested by nothing else in the picture. It's this cave mouth that recalls the most memorable—and also the funniest—painting on this theme, Uccello's *St. George and the Dragon*, and a look back at that painting with its cave mouth makes us realize what's missing here (so often in Koerner's teeming pictures the key is what's *not* there): there's no princess! In Uccello she stands demurely, oblivious to her savior and pretty clearly feeling sorry for the dragon (look at what she says in U. A. Fanthorpe's amusing ecphrastic poem, "Not My Best Side"), and you can see that already in 1456 Uccello is playing on the distortions of human sympathy by the grim enforcements of theocratic mythology. In response to this, Koerner gives us one or more additional turns of irony: *What* princess? *What* savior? And above all, what *dragon* apart from whatever our play instinct in the amusement park can imagine? The twentieth century has shown that we are still cave men, like the two violent naked men in the background of *Vanity Fair*; despite now living in a demystified world. Ours is still a world that goes round and round, a fun-house carousel in which no progress seems possible.

Vanity Fair (*Lebensspiegel*, or *Mirror of Life*, p. 45) refers neither to Thackeray nor to the magazine, which was not revived until 1983. This painting is, once again, carnivalesque, throwing emphasis on the play of appearances, often shallow ones, within which human vanity plays itself out. That this is a distortion of life's possibilities is brutally driven home by the painting's impossible angles, to offset which the man in the foreground, the subject of our sketch, strains to peer around a corner. Not that he doesn't have his own vanity—the game of cards

interrupted by lovemaking, lovemaking interrupted by curiosity—hence we take him also, proxy for ourselves as art viewers, to be an imperfect witness. Dominant at the center is the toothy poster of vain female beauty covering the brick wall where the witness can barely see it, and at a sharp angle causing us spectators too to strain almost as much as he does. (Koerner liked billboards, and this enormous face seems to carry us twenty-five years ahead to Warhol or Rosenquist; but we can see that Koerner does not share the coy ambivalence of Pop Art in the face of shallowness.) To the left is the woman trying on coats before a mirror (*the* mirror of the picture's title), closer to us the vain gastronomes with their faces tellingly distorted by gluttony in the tradition from Daumier to Dix and Grosz to which one aspect of Koerner's art belongs, and then the combatants in the distant background behind other crowds, one crowd dancing, even the gleaners in the field hoping to find something—all is vanity, saith the absent preacher. In the lower foreground, seated under a porch eave where the figure leaning out the window cannot see them, is an elderly couple in the place of threshold guardians, suggesting a gateway to the death implicit in all the busy pursuits behind them, yet with oddly smug expressions on their faces, as their pose too, sitting at rest in the quietude they feel they have earned, is vanity.

Very different from all that bustle is the simple drawing of a modern-day hiker with a backpack who is meant to be the unhappy protagonist of Schubert's *Winterreise*. We see the hiker from behind, which is Koerner's way of evoking the *Rückenfigur* so prominent in the work of Schubert's contemporary Caspar David Friedrich (subject of Joseph Koerner's second book). We often see these figures with their backs to us in Koerner, at times absorbed quite naturally in work calling for them to turn away, at other times turned with a more pointed indifference to us, in a

direction more important than ours. But what causes the rather nondescript figure in the sketch for the *Winterreise* to show us his back? Like the sketch for *Moby Dick*, this sketch is for just one panel in the large painting of fifteen panels called *Winter Journey* (p. 6). It's the second from the right among the bottom four panels, and the completed image shows our backpacker checking into a hotel, his back naturally turned away from anyone who is not a desk clerk. In Schubert, our hiker is disappointed by the marriage of his summer sweetheart to a wealthy suitor and departs on an arduous winter trek across country. Koerner (a trained tenor who sang Schubert's cycle himself) rather surprisingly does not emphasize the loneliness of this figure. The washed-out palette of the fourteen panels surrounding the large central panel with its colorful May idyll does make for a kind of contrast (though it's only this central panel in which we find a posture of grief), placing the hiker mainly in everyday scenes like that of the hotel lobby. We are fortunate, then, to see the clearer emotional purpose of the isolated sketch in our exhibit. Here there is no surrounding, certainly no hotel lobby, just a little shading, and the figure, wholly our contemporary as he is too in the panels, is withdrawn into himself—a *Rückenfigur* deeply engaged, head down and indifferent to all spectators, in the extreme, not to say solipsistic, inwardness that Michael Fried would call "absorption." Except, of course, for the banal familiarity of his appearance, his schlumpy lack of distinction. His very grief is vanity.

I was asked to contribute the perspective of a literary scholar to our Koerner exhibit. That has been a delightful exercise, because Koerner is so rich in narrative intricacy. I should admit openly, though, that one of the most skillfully composed and arresting paintings in our exhibit, *Man and Hydrant* (p. 39), still baffles any effort I can make at interpretation. Not only the balance of the image

but the exuberant clash of styles—the line drawing (perhaps meant to have been filled in?) of the man crumpled in a heap after a bender contrasted with the finished painting, in several styles, of the hydrant, the marble behind it and along the ground, and the shadowy ancient sage similar in posture to the drunk but belonging to the solid black backdrop of a different world and time—is all quite wonderful but I have only fleeting thoughts of no value about what it might mean. It's the artistry of it that I admire, and that brings me to the many pictures, many of them watercolors and many of Pittsburgh, that are mostly without human subjects and resist interpretation as much as the human subjects invite it. These are among the most impressive paintings in the exhibit. The sureness of the watercolor strokes, rapid and perfectly placed, in *Church on South Side* (p. 62) and *The Water Tower* (p. 56), for example, is immensely difficult to accomplish, as is the more Cézanne-like brushwork in oils of *Three Houses, Murray Hill Avenue* (p. 51) and *Road Construction in Sharpsburg* (p. 53). Austrian subjects are just as amenable, though, to Koerner's late relaxation of technique, a seemingly effortless turn that only a virtuoso could manage, and we are lucky to have the watercolor *Village in the Wachau* (p. 65).

I've spent some time above with that dubious topic, plays on words, and can't resist adding one more in conclusion, needless to say with no wish to detract from this splendid exhibit by a major postwar artist whose attitude toward plays on words I'm sure I haven't demonstrated to anyone's satisfaction. Take a look at those two hirsute men in deck chairs, called *Sitting in Deck Chairs* (p. 37). How irresistible if, through some mistake, they were to have been called *Sitting in Deck Hairs*!

Paul Fry
William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English





No Erasures

Jonathan Weinberg

My Parents 2 (fig. 11, also see p. 57) stands out among the thirty-odd works that make up the pictures that Henry Koerner created and that his son, the art historian Joseph Leo Koerner, has given to the Center that bears his father's name. A linocut, it is the only print in the gift, and therefore by virtue of the reproductive process it is not unique, not only because it is number twenty-six out of an edition of fifty, but also because its content was essentially copied from a painting done some twenty-five years before. The process by which Koerner rendered the painting, which was executed in oil paint in hues of white, golden brown, and silvery gray, into the starkly contrasted black-and-white medium of a linocut, involved the artist initially tracing the image from a photographic reproduction of the 1946 painting.¹ Originally trained in graphic design, Koerner was a successful poster artist before he turned to painting and would have been familiar with using such techniques to create advertisements. Yet by the time he made this print, tracing and working from photographs, which were a staple of a commercial illustrator's craft, were anathema to Koerner's practice. From the mid-1950s on, Koerner insisted that all his pictures, including the portraits of famous leaders, artists, and celebrities such as the young Senator John F. Kennedy and the great opera diva Maria Callas that he did for the cover of *Time* magazine, be executed directly from life. He was so insistent on not being dependent on photographs of his subjects for his journalistic work, that he flew to Vietnam at great risk to depict a group of soldiers and convinced a pilot to hover his helicopter over the scene so it could be quickly sketched into the final picture.

Fig. 11 Detail from *My Parents 2*, 1971

Another aspect of the print that is different from the other pictures in the group is that *My Parents 2* was collaborative. He created it with the help of the printmaker George Nama, who if he didn't cut the actual linoleum plate, certainly was responsible for printing the edition so that each image would be exactly the same. It is my guess that this aspect of the process would not have appealed to Koerner, who would have himself cherished any inconsistencies as expressing the hand-made aspects of the medium and the inevitability of change and mistakes. Almost all the other pictures in the exhibition were the result of Koerner's standing before a canvas, or sketching on a piece of paper, producing an image where the marks are a result of what he could see and record directly. A favorite medium was a special kind of Waterman fountain pen that could utilize India ink, precisely because the marks it made could not be erased.² Koerner insisted that whatever were his initial reactions to a motif had a validity—a truth—that would be diminished by reconsideration.

Why then is the print in the exhibition? The obvious answer is that it serves as a stand-in for the original which his son calls "Koerner's public Opus One" and that "it launched his artistic career."³ The painting *My Parents II* is probably the most famous work by the artist, justly celebrated for the way it so poignantly memorializes Koerner's parents, who were murdered by the Nazis. Both the painting and the later print's elegiac mood belie the artist's surprisingly optimistic description of the figures who face away from the viewer toward some unknown: "I helped my parents to walk once more in their beloved Vienna Woods and I hung the locket with its photo of their children on a tree where their ways parted." The print thus functions in the present exhibition to help us think about multiple absences and losses. The terrible absence of Koerner's parents and the artist's escape from the Holocaust, but also

the absence of one of the defining pictures of his career in the exhibit. Above all, it asks us to think retrospectively even when we are only faced with a few dozen of the thousands of paintings and drawings the artist made in his lifetime. Indeed, Joseph Koerner has carefully selected works that give us a sense of the artist's entire career, beginning with the wonderfully fresh sketch of a group of men at a table executed when he was just twenty-three and ending with the equally immediate painting of his penultimate year, *Augarten Gate with Operation*. If we think of *My Parents II* in this way, its two paths act like a metaphor, speaking less of what awaits us beyond the grave, and more of the different directions, chosen and unchosen, a life and a career might take. That ultimate retrospective poem, Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," comes to mind precisely because, if there was ever a man "who took the road less traveled by," it was Henry Koerner.

Retrospectives are such a fixture of the art world that we forget how peculiar they actually are. There is an adage, that I suspect has more currency among art critics than artists, that you only can measure the true value of a painter's career when you see the artist's work in a retrospective, but the truth is that no one makes a lifetime of works to be seen all together in chronological order. Often a picture that looks wonderful on its own, or in a discrete series, seems repetitious or incongruous when it is put next to another painting. As a result, well-meaning curators tend to edit out what they think are false directions or onetime inventions. Rather than make us think about the discontinuities and paradoxes, experiments and mistakes of a working creative practice—all the difficulties that have to be overcome to actually make marvelous pictures—retrospectives tend to make the great triumphs of a life seem almost inevitable and predictable. I do not think this is the case with the current selection,



Fig. 12 Detail from *Mort in His Library*, c. 1970

where a modest sketch of pigs, or a very stylized image of a “standing tree,” shares wall space with the very finished and ambitious portrait of a writer named Mort in his study, invaded by pigeons (fig. 12, also see p. 55). This monumental portrait itself is paradoxical. If it is meticulously recorded from life, where do the pigeons come from? Like the helicopter in Vietnam, did they hover over the papers while Koerner carefully depicted their flight in the same way that he rendered the face of his friend? Koerner’s rule was to only paint what he saw, but he was willing to combine visions, so that it was alright to paint stuffed birds in a museum display in one sitting, and combine them with the portrait. In this way, Koerner’s paintings are retrospective—they make permanent experiences that happened over time, whether it is the observations of minutes of a sitter in

a room, or a series of events that happened over days or months. This is certainly the case of *Augarten Gate with Operation*, in which children playing a game incongruously while perched on a fence are seen in the same canvas with a meticulous depiction of a doctor doing open-heart surgery and various figures half-nude and dressed in the foreground. The troubled heart itself floats in the sky like a football tossed by the playing children below. Joseph Koerner’s explanation—that the painting represents his father’s near death and salvation from a heart attack—does not fully resolve the painting’s strange shifts of scale and viewpoint. The Augarten is a 129-acre public park in the Leopoldstadt section of Vienna with a celebrated past of pageantry and celebrations that included the great composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart conducting his own

music, but it also bordered the historical Jewish quarter. In this context the fence evokes marginalization, and its metal spikes the terrible consequences of German antisemitism. Such narrative threads do not necessarily make sense together. Why should they, when the same German culture that produced this splendid public park and the composer Mozart, also produced the failed watercolor artist Hitler and the Final Solution. Indeed, Koerner's Cézannesque overlapping of brushstrokes renders people and things in a way that does not cohere. In narrative and form, Koerner never conveys the sensation of wholeness and tranquillity amid the chaos of experience that is so satisfying in Paul Cézanne's painting.

Of course, I cannot be sure what exactly Koerner found so compelling in Cézanne's work, but I take it as a given that Cézanne pointed a way to a depiction that was not based on a single viewpoint and that it was a model of how to construct a view of the world that was true to the shifts of the eye as we contemplate objects and people over time. The inconsistencies that resulted were not mistakes, but truer to the instability of that world, which is always in motion, both on an atomic level and in the cosmos. If Cézanne's pictures could encapsulate the tiny shifts in perception brought on by gazing back and forth from the canvas to the motif, why not also include entire shifts in motifs from looking, let's say, at children playing one moment, and then weeks or months later, at a complex medical surgery? Through all the radical changes and locations, one thing that was consistent was Koerner's dictum, "never a brushstroke without looking."

In this way Koerner's emulation of Cézanne was also a critique. Where Cézanne was always painstakingly reworking and correcting, Koerner had an almost religious faith in the validity of his first glance, and a willingness to allow certain of his pictures to remain unresolved. Often Koerner's

Cézannesque pictures, such as *George and the Dragon*, with its weird juxtaposition of a gentleman posing for a formal portrait in front of an amusement park ride in Vienna, seem dissonant and fragmentary, even when they are heavily worked. For Koerner the canvas is not a place to resolve contradictions—a picture should be as provisional and inconsistent as life itself. Particularly the way he overlaps brushstrokes in his watercolors, like *Man with Zither*, rather than blending them together as in his early paintings, suggests precise moments of observation and the actual time it takes not only for the motif to be observed, but for the paint to dry, before another stroke can be applied. Famously, the critic Michael Fried claimed that the ideal modernist picture—a Mark Rothko or Kenneth Noland abstraction—should be viewed as if its effects were instantaneous, but Koerner's paintings are all about assembling the image so you sense the time it took to make it and the memories and associations it evokes. His most ambitious works are like puzzles that ask of the viewer the intense scrutiny that went into their production. The ideal is not to encapsulate a moment, or even express a specific feeling—Koerner was no impressionist—but to imbue the canvas with the quality of life itself. When Koerner talks about his father's enormous energy, and his ability to enlist complete strangers to pose for him on the beach or in the streets, I think of the vitality of his pictures and the way that painting was for him something you live rather than just do.

I want to say that Koerner's art resists some overarching story in which his subjects and forms all come together, but I suppose that is a story in and of itself. To those viewers who think that the history of the most "advanced" art of the twentieth century plots a movement away from figuration and narrative, abandoning the easel painting, Koerner's career might be retrograde, even anti-modernist. Certainly,

his work in the 1940s and early '50s, with its illusionism based on photographs of places and people in Vienna and New York, was self-consciously resistant to what abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning were doing at the time. The wonderful sketch of a shirtless man looking out over the window ledge from 1946—a study for the central figure in Koerner's magnificent *Vanity Fair* (aka *Mirror of Life*)⁴ (fig. 13), now in the Whitney Museum of American Art—almost seems as if it

were conceived in defiance of Clement Greenberg's dictums against treating the canvas as if it were a window. Later, when Koerner stopped relying on photographs to create his depictions, it was not because they made his pictures too illusionistic, or in Greenberg's terms unpictorial, but rather because they were too flat—they did not give him enough information about the three-dimensional nature of his motifs. Koerner never was particularly interested in doing in his paintings what the camera does



Fig. 13 *Mirror of Life*, 1946, oil on composition board, 42 × 36 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase

best—that is, capture a precise moment from one point of view. All through his career, he constructed pictures like *Vanity Fair*, with images derived from both the United States and Vienna, or *Fragile Garden* (fig. 14, also see p. 60), with its triptych structure of subjects that encapsulated a multitude of times and places. But this multiplicity was always based on motifs derived from the world out there and his belief that a painting, if not a window, was more like a kaleidoscope. As his son succinctly put it, “There was nothing unreal about what he painted, only about where it appeared.”⁵ And yet despite the supposedly anachronistic qualities of his essentially realist practice, how can you call a painter like Koerner anti-modernist—an artist who spent so much of his later career thinking through and expanding on the example of Cézanne, the painter who for so many modernists was the ultimate precursor?

When I first started contemplating what connected the drawings of Koerner’s fellow soldiers in the 1940s with a picture of children playing in the rubble of post-World War II Vienna, or a painting of a water tower in Pittsburgh with a zither player

seen on a European street, I immediately thought of Charles Baudelaire’s *Painter of Modern Life*, an essay that is considered one of the defining texts of what it is to be, if not a modernist, at least an artist committed to representing contemporary life. Koerner’s son had the same idea when he called his father a *flâneur*, Baudelaire’s term for a person who wanders the city, taking in and rendering the spectacle of everyday life, like a walking mirror. Koerner’s appreciation of the fragmentary and instable nature of experience is particularly Baudelairean:

*...we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. He is an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I’, at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive.*⁶

Joseph Koerner also notes how his father, like Baudelaire, deeply identified with the way children supposedly see the world, new and fresh. When Joseph was a child, his father would enlist him on



Fig. 14 *Fragile Garden*, c. 1980s

his painting campaigns, searching out motifs in the streets of Vienna or in the surrounding countryside, and then painting side by side. Sometimes Henry would depict his son in the landscape, as a surrogate for his own childhood growing up in Austria, but even before Joseph was born, Koerner was thinking about the child as a metaphor for the artist. In the 1956 *Children in Empty Lot* (p. 52), there is a little boy who stands in the foreground, surveying the scene where boys and girls play, oblivious to the scarred state of the city.

Baudelaire's essay has been enlisted by a long line of art historians to explain and justify the art of the founding fathers of modernism, Courbet and Manet, even though neither is actually the artist Baudelaire was talking about in his essay. I think it was something of an embarrassment to the later champions of abstraction, that Baudelaire's actual subject was the modest Constantin Guys, who made his living as an illustrator, creating drawings and watercolors of daily life for French and British newspapers. No word has been considered more derogatory by modernists than "illustrator," not only because of how illustrations supposedly confuse the purely visual with the literary, but because they smack of commercialism and populism. But, for Baudelaire, all these aspects of the way Guys's work interacted with contemporary life made him ideal. In fact, Baudelaire could not imagine an art divorced from the task of depicting the real world in all its vulgar complexity: "this transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. By neglecting it, you cannot fail to tumble into the abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty."⁷ Like Baudelaire's hero Guys, Koerner was a trained illustrator (who, however, worked for *Time* magazine), but more importantly, he was committed to recording his sensations from life faithfully and with integrity, irrespective of what an elite thought were

the proper content and form of contemporary art.

The Baudelairean *flâneur* is a particularly apt prototype for Koerner, not just because he is so responsive to modernity, but because in some profound sense he is also outside of it. When Baudelaire writes: "To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world,"⁸ he could be conjuring up Koerner's life story and career. Driven by the Nazis to escape Europe for the United States in 1938, after the war Henry Koerner kept returning to Austria, the country that had betrayed him and his family, not to seek reconciliation, but to represent in painting and drawings precisely this Baudelairean sense of alienation. Whether Koerner paints Pittsburgh or Vienna, there is always a sensation of identification that comes from a deep familiarity with his surroundings and a penetrating gaze, and its opposite—an offputting feeling that what is being depicted has become strange, precisely because it has been observed so intensely. But it would be a mistake to pathologize this quality of estrangement in Koerner's art, or limit its meaning to the trauma of a Survivor. My point in referencing Baudelaire's essay is that these feelings of alienation, to be both an "I" and a "non-I," alone in the crowd, and an outsider in your own home, are the very essence of what it is to be modern, or post-post-modern for that matter.

When I first heard about Joseph Koerner's wonderful gift to the Koerner Center, I was a bit surprised. What does Henry Koerner's art have to do with the mission of the Center other than its name? But in studying the works that make up this marvelous gift, I have come to realize it makes perfect sense. Joseph's efforts to promote his father's legacy reverberate with one of the most important tasks of scholarship, to preserve and remember. Joseph and I both get accolades for our interpretive abilities—what

does a work of art mean, and what are its historical contexts? But there is no more important mission in art history than resurrecting neglected art and making sure that future generations revere it. We find it comforting to repeat that old chestnut, *Ars longa, vita brevis*, but if the work itself doesn't survive—if it isn't cared for and cherished, it does not live. So too with people: hence the Henry Koerner Center itself.

I think Koerner's art was always meant to speak to an audience beyond his own generation. This too is the importance of the child in Koerner's practice, not just the boy in the foreground of *Children in Empty Lot*, surveying the action, but also the young Joseph Koerner, working alongside his father on his painting campaigns in the summer. The very existence of Joseph (and now his children) defied the Final Solution and the terrible acts of erasures that were the Holocaust. Even if Joseph Koerner took a divergent path, his art historical work elucidating the great tradition of figurative and narrative art followed in his father's footsteps. It makes clear what were the stakes in his father's practice and why it was so important. As Joseph conjures up what it was to paint next to his father, I imagine painting and drawing alongside them, hearing Henry Koerner's entreaties in my mind, "no brushstrokes without looking." No erasures!

Jonathan Weinberg

Jonathan Weinberg, Ph.D. (Yale College B.A. 1978 and Jonathan Edwards Fellow) is a painter, art historian, and curator of the Maurice Sendak Foundation. He is the author of several books including Pier Groups: Art and Sex Along the New York Waterfront and Ambition and Love in American Art. He curated and edited the catalogue for the 2023–24 touring exhibition Wild Things Are Happening: The Art of Maurice Sendak. In 2022 an exhibition of his GENESIS window paintings and prints was on view at the Ely Center of Contemporary Art in New Haven.

- 1 The information about the making of the print and most of the other facts in this essay come from Joseph Leo Koerner, who generously answered my questions in a series of calls in February 2023, and in earlier conversations we had about his father's art in 2015, when I wrote an essay about Henry Koerner's portraits. See Jonathan Weinberg, "Uneasy Pictures," in *Real Portraits, Time Covers by Henry Koerner* (New Haven: The Henry Koerner Center for Emeritus Faculty at Yale University, 2015).
- 2 I believe that this must have been a Waterman Safety Fountain Pen, which by the late 1950s had long since been out of production. Normally, a regular fountain pen cannot use India ink because it contains shellack that would harden in the nib, but the safety pen design retracts the nib into the ink of the barrel when it is not in use, so it does not dry out. It also has the advantage of closing securely for travel, so it does not leak, hence its name.
- 3 Joseph Leo Koerner, *Unheimliche Heimat: Henry Koerner* (Vienna: Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, 1997). 21.
- 4 Joseph Leo Koerner told me that *Vanity Fair* was his father's title for the picture that the Whitney Museum of American Art calls *Mirror of Life*.
- 5 Joseph Leo Koerner, *Unheimliche Heimat: Henry Koerner*, 11.
- 6 Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (New York: De Capo Press, 1964), 9–10.
- 7 Baudelaire, 13.
- 8 Baudelaire, 9.

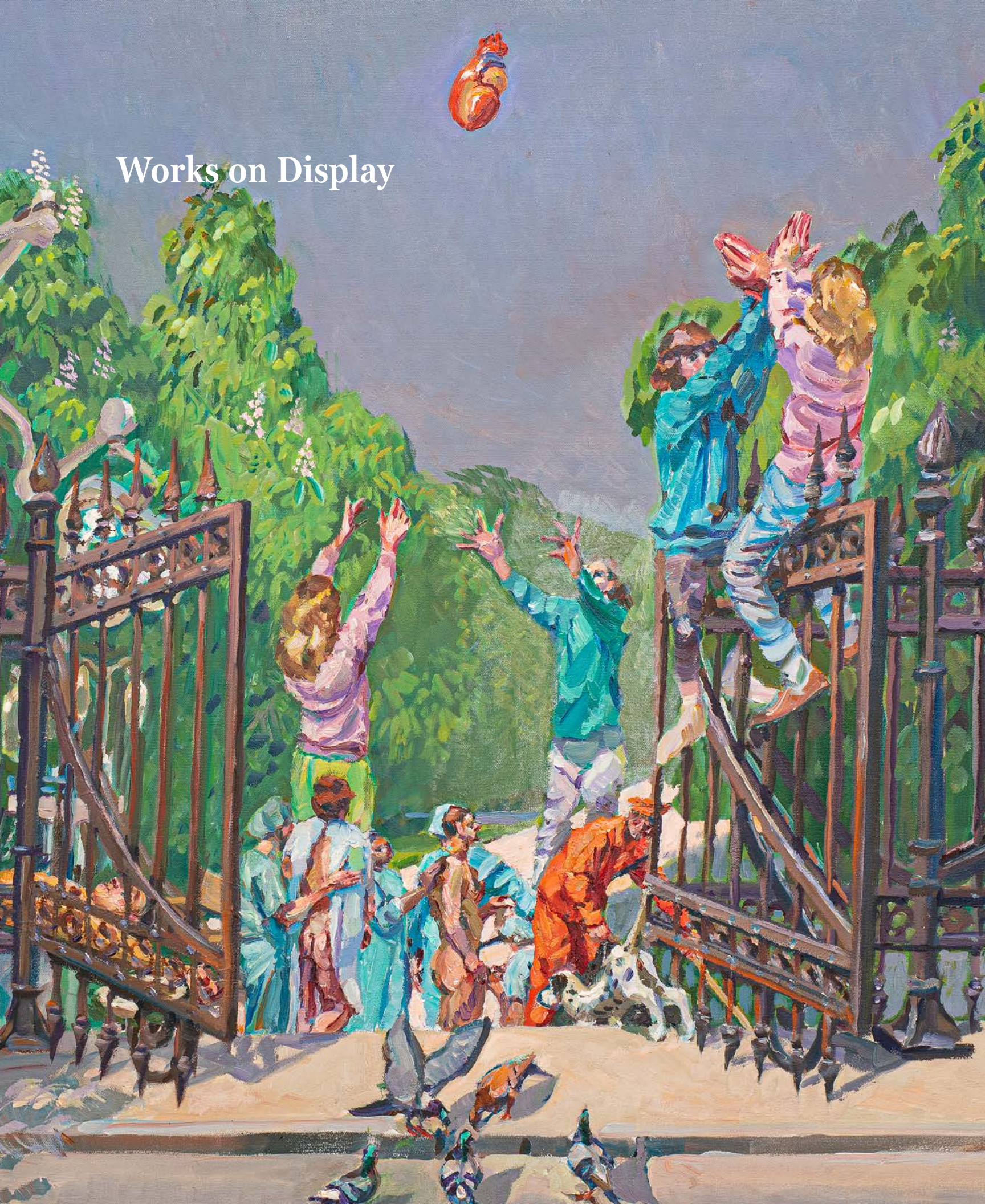
Exhibition Checklist

1. *Four Men at Table*, c. 1938, pencil on letterhead of Sachter Bucharest branch, 17 × 15 in.
2. *Writing (U.S. Army)*, 1944, pen and ink on Fort Belvoir letterhead, 15 ½ × 12 ¾ in.
3. *Soldier (U.S. Army)*, 1944, pen and ink on Fort Belvoir letterhead, 12 15/16 × 16 ½ in.
4. *Sitting on Deck Chairs (U.S. Army)*, 1945, pen and ink on tissue paper, 19 ¼ × 19 in.
5. *Germany Surrenders*, April 1945, gouache on cardboard, 19 × 14 ½ in.*
6. *Waiter with Tray*, 1945, pen and ink on tissue paper, 18 ¼ × 19 ¼ in.
7. *Man and Hydrant*, 1945–46, pen and ink with prisma pencil on tissue paper, 24 × 21 in.
8. *Standing Tree*, 1946, pen and ink with prisma pencil in gray on tissue paper, 16 ¾ × 20 ¼ in.
9. *Study for My Parents No. 2*, 1946, gouache on cardboard, 21 ½ × 19 in.*
10. *Study for "The Prophet"*, 1946, gouache on cardboard, 18 ½ × 19 in.*
11. *Study for Vanity Fair*, 1946, gouache on cardboard, 26 × 24 ¾ in.
12. "Die Geschlagenen" (*The Skin of Our Teeth*), from the exhibition at Haus am Waldsee, 1946–47, reproduction, 16 × 18 7/8 in.
13. "Lebensspiegel" (*Vanity Fair / Mirror of Life*), from the exhibition at Haus am Waldsee, 1946–47, reproduction, 17 7/8 × 17 1/8 in.
14. *Amusement Park*, 1948, pen and ink on tissue paper, 21 × 18 in.
15. *Tunnel of Love*, 1948, oil on masonite in a hand-painted frame by the artist, 36 1/2 × 28 in. Yale University Art Gallery. Purchased with the Katharine Ordway Fund and a gift from Laila Twigg-Smith, by exchange
16. *Two Sketches of Woman Sweeping*, study for *The Rose Bush*, c. 1949–50, pen and ink with prisma pencil on tissue paper, 15 1/8 × 20 3/4 in.
17. *Three Pigs Posing*, study for *The Rose Bush*, c. 1949–50, pen and ink on tissue paper, 19 ½ × 15 ¾ in.

18. *Study for "The Winter Journey,"* 1951, prisma pencil on tissue paper, 14 ¼ × 18 ½ in.
19. *PCW Hockey Field,* 1953, oil on canvas, 30 ⅝ × 24 ⅝ in.
20. *Three Houses, Murray Hill Avenue,* 1954, oil on canvas, 29 ¼ × 23 ¼ in.
21. *Children in Empty Lot,* c. 1956, Vienna, pen and ink on paper, 26 × 22 ¼ in.
22. *Road Construction in Sharpsburg,* c. 1958, oil on canvas, 28 ¼ × 24 ¼ in.
23. *George and the Dragon,* 1964, oil on canvas, 29 ⅝ × 24 ¾ in.
24. *Mort in His Library,* c. 1970, oil on canvas, 32 ⅝ × 38 ¾ in.
25. *The Water Tower,* c. 1970, oil on canvas, 35 ¼ × 41 ¼ in.*
26. *My Parents 2,* 1971, linocut on rice paper, edition of 50, 28 ½ × 25 ½ in.
27. *Cowboy Over Pittsburgh, No. 1,* c. 1975, watercolor on paper mounted on particle board, 26 × 30 ½ in.
28. *Man with Skull Mask,* drawing for *Moby Dick,* 1977, magic marker and watercolor on paper and dry-mounted, 15 ¼ × 20 ½ in.
29. *Fragile Garden,* c. 1980s, triptych watercolor on paper mounted on board, 44 ⅝ × 24 ¼ in.
30. *Church on South Side,* Pittsburgh, c. 1984, watercolor on paper mounted on board, 26 × 31 ½ in.
31. *Racing Ring,* Prater (Freudenau, with Imperial Tribune), 1985, Vienna, winter, watercolor on paper mounted on board, 23 ⅝ × 29 ½ in.
32. *Four Walls,* 1986, four watercolors on paper mounted on board, 35 ¼ × 27 ¾ in.
33. *Village in the Wachau,* c. 1986, watercolor on paper mounted on board, 23 ⅝ × 29 ½ in.
34. *Man with Zither* (Peter Kreuzberger), 1987, watercolor on paper mounted on board, 31 ¼ × 25 ¼ in.
35. *Augarten Gate with Operation,* 1990, oil on canvas, 52 ¾ × 34 ⅝ in.

*On loan from a private collection

Works on Display





Four Men at Table, c. 1938, pencil
on letterhead of Sachter Bucharest
branch, 17 × 15 in.



Writing (U.S. Army), 1944, pen and ink
on Fort Belvoir letterhead, 15 ½ × 12 ¾ in.



Soldier (U.S. Army), 1944, pen and ink
on Fort Belvoir letterhead, 12 $\frac{1}{16}$ \times 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.



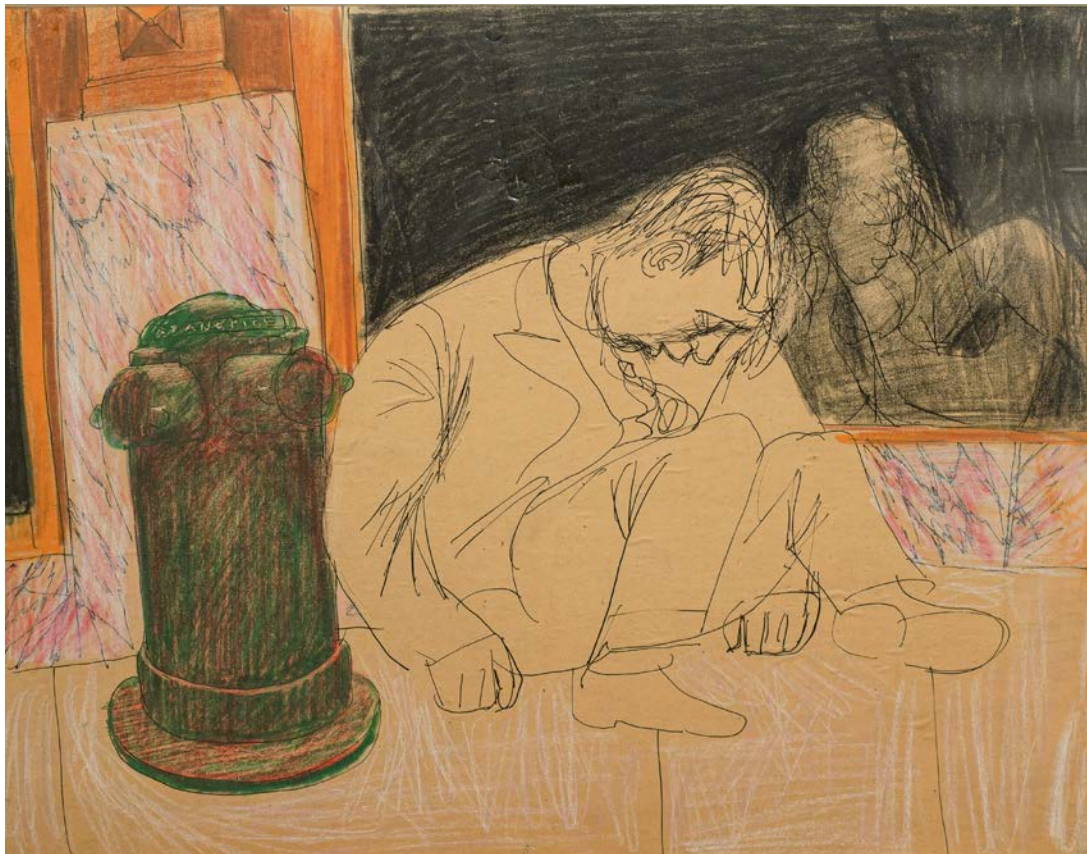
Sitting on Deck Chairs (U.S. Army),
1945, pen and ink on tissue paper,
19 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 19 in.



Germany Surrenders, April 1945,
gouache on cardboard, 19 × 14 ½ in.



Waiter with Tray, 1945, pen and ink
on tissue paper, 18 ¼ × 19 ¼ in.



Man and Hydrant, 1945–46,
pen and ink with prisma pencil on
tissue paper, 24 × 21 in.



Standing Tree, 1946, pen and ink
with prisma pencil in gray on tissue
paper, 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ \times 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.



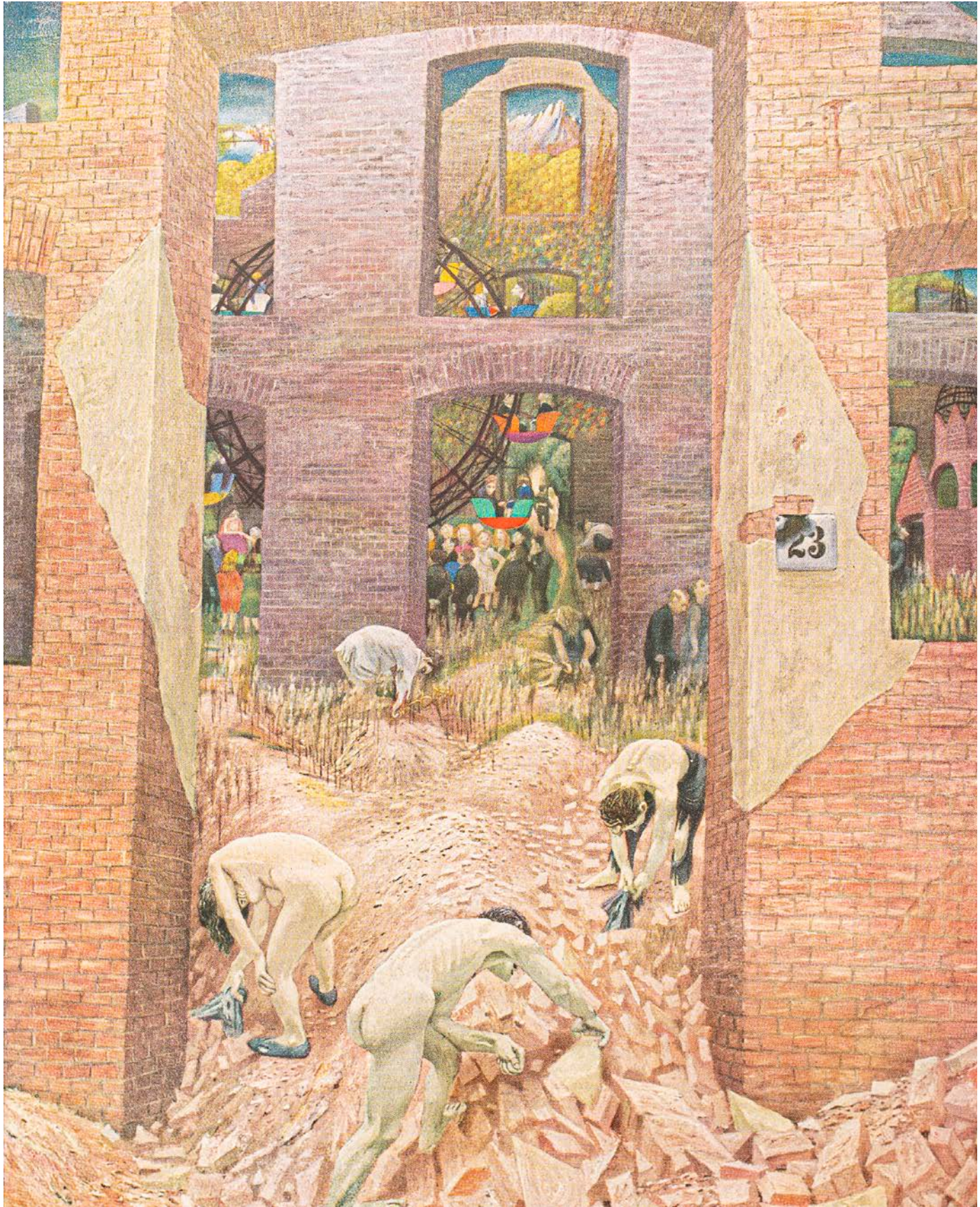
Study for My Parents No. 2, 1946,
gouache on cardboard, 21 ½ × 19 in.



Study for "The Prophet," 1946,
gouache on cardboard, 18 ½ × 19 in.



Study for Vanity Fair, 1946,
gouache on cardboard, 26 × 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.





Above: "Lebensspiegel" (*Vanity Fair / Mirror of Life*), from the exhibition at Haus am Waldsee, 1946–47, reproduction, 17 $\frac{5}{8}$ \times 17 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.

Left: "Die Geschlagenen" (*The Skin of Our Teeth*), from the exhibition at Haus am Waldsee, 1946–47, reproduction, 16 \times 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.



Above: *Amusement Park*, 1948, pen and ink on tissue paper, 21 × 18 in.

Right: *Tunnel of Love*, 1948, oil on masonite in a hand-painted frame by the artist, 36 ½ × 28 in. Yale University Art Gallery. Purchased with the Katharine Ordway Fund and a gift from Laila Twigg-Smith, by exchange





Two Sketches of Woman Sweeping,
study for *The Rose Bush*, c. 1949–50,
pen and ink with prisma pencil on
tissue paper, 15 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.



Three Pigs Posing, study for *The Rose Bush*, c. 1949–50, pen and ink on tissue paper, 19 ½ × 15 ¾ in.



Study for "The Winter Journey,"
1951, prisma pencil on tissue paper,
14 ¼ × 18 ½ in.



PCW Hockey Field, 1953,
oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{7}{8}$ \times 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.



Three Houses, Murray Hill Avenue,
1954, oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 23 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.



Children in Empty Lot, c. 1956,
Vienna, pen and ink on paper,
26 × 22 ¼ in.



Road Construction in Sharpsburg,
c. 1958, oil on canvas, 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 24 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.



Above: *George and the Dragon*, 1964,
oil on canvas, 29 ⁵/₈ × 24 ³/₄ in.

Right: *Mort in His Library*, c. 1970,
oil on canvas, 32 ⁵/₈ × 38 ³/₄ in.





The Water Tower, c. 1970, oil on
canvas, 35 ¼ × 41 ¼ in.



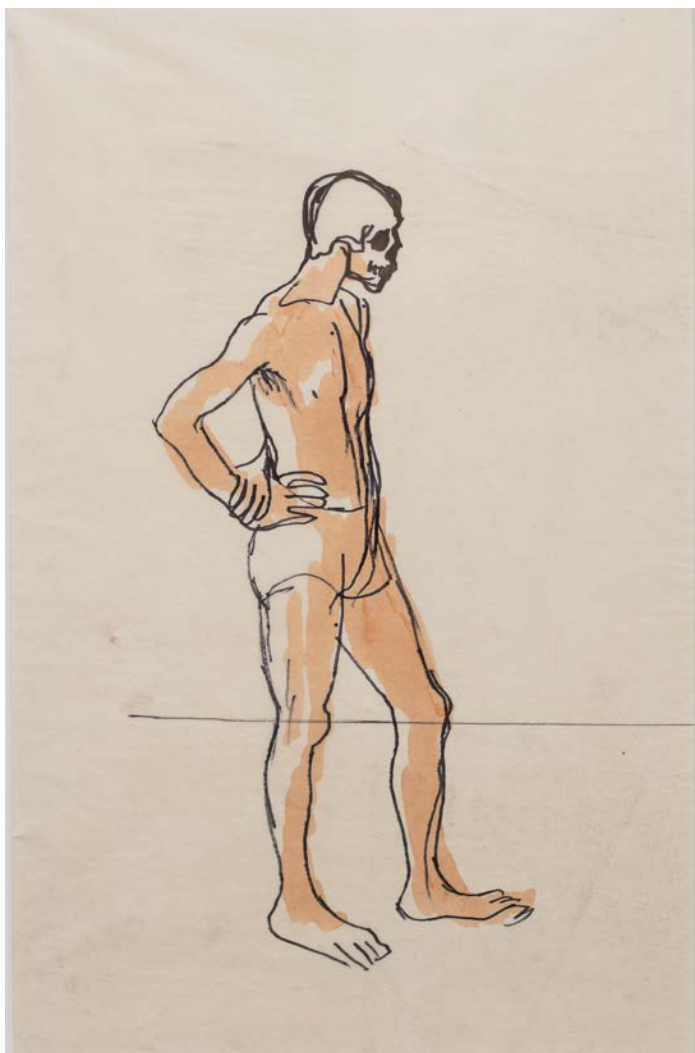
My Parents

26/5/1971

Hy Hwang

My Parents 2, 1971, linocut on rice paper, edition of 50, 28 ½ × 25 ½ in.





Left: *Cowboy Over Pittsburgh, No. 1*,
c. 1975, watercolor on paper mounted
on particle board, 26 × 30 ½ in.

Above: *Man with Skull Mask*, drawing
for *Moby Dick*, 1977, magic marker and
watercolor on paper and dry-mounted,
15 ¼ × 20 ½ in.

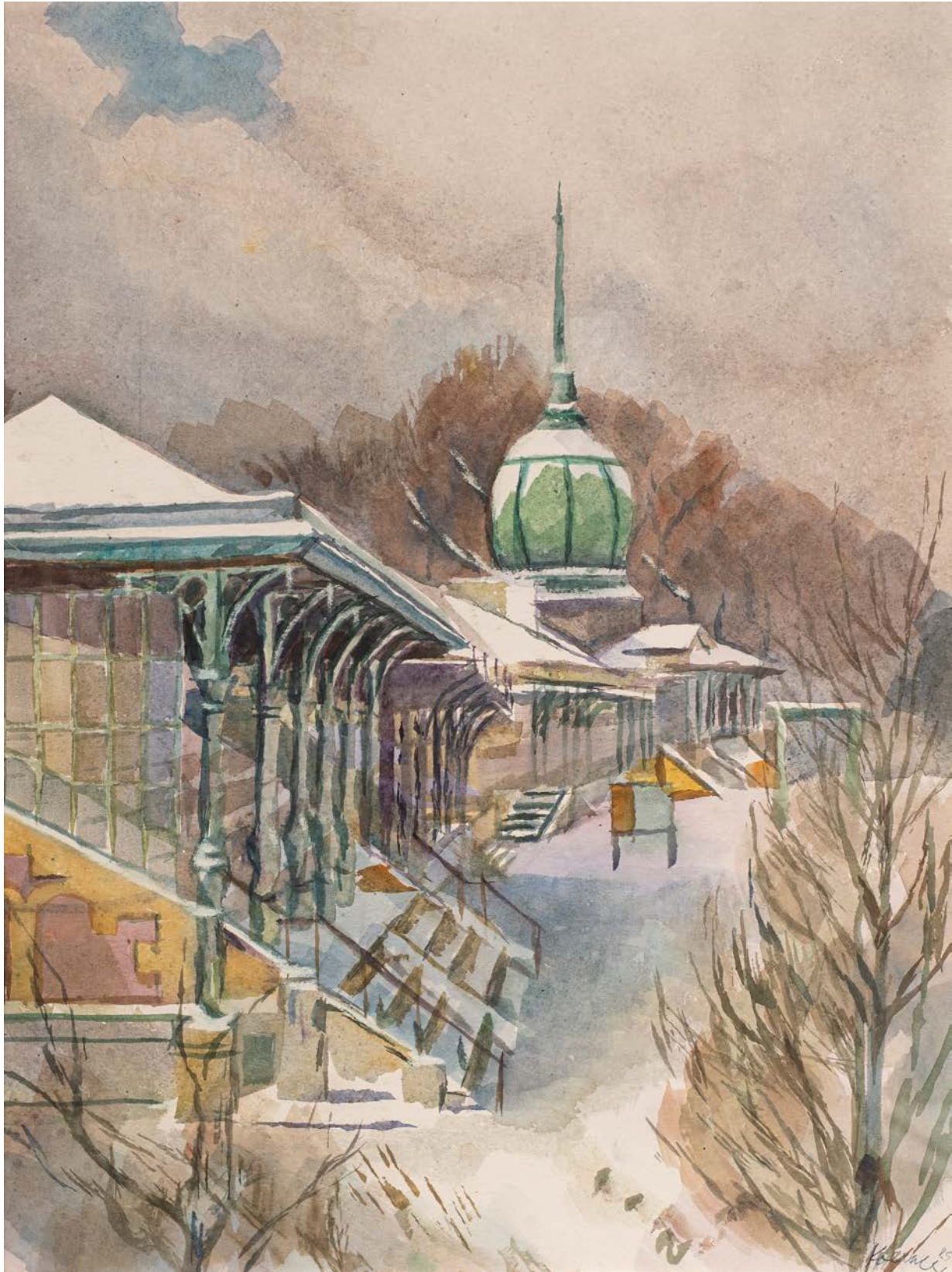


Fragile Garden, c. 1980s, triptych
watercolor on paper mounted on
board, 44 $\frac{3}{8}$ \times 24 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.





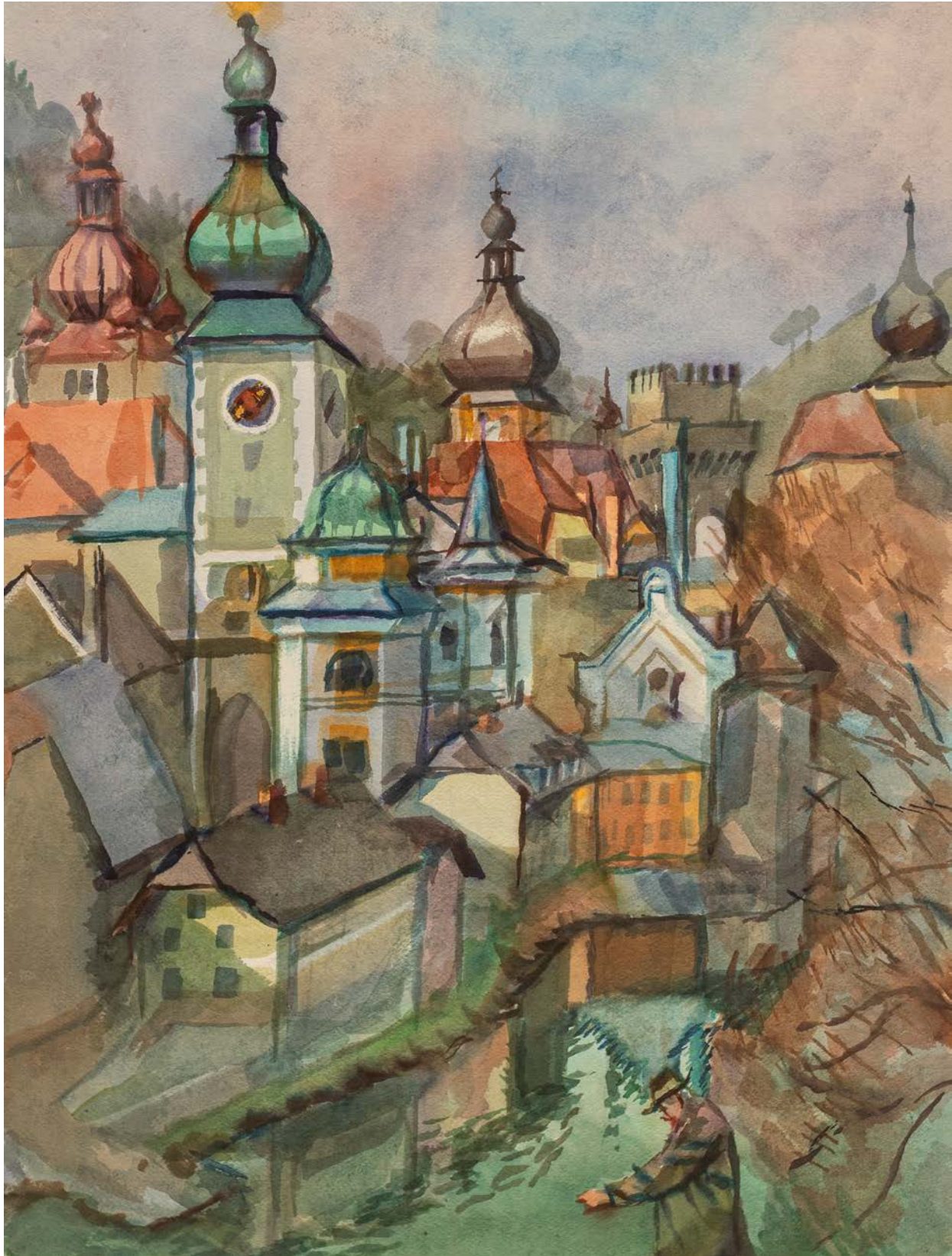
Church on South Side, Pittsburgh,
c. 1984, watercolor on paper
mounted on board, 26 × 31 ½ in.



Racing Ring, Prater (Freudenau, with Imperial Tribune), 1985, Vienna, winter, watercolor on paper mounted on board, 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ \times 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.



Four Walls, 1986, four watercolors
on paper mounted on board,
35 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.



Village in the Wachau, c. 1986,
watercolor on paper mounted on
board, 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ \times 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.



Man with Zither (Peter Kreuzberger),
1987, watercolor on paper mounted
on board, 31 ¼ × 25 ¼ in.



Augarten Gate with Operation, 1990,
oil on canvas, 52 $\frac{3}{4}$ \times 34 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.

Designed and set in Garamond Premier Pro and Georgia Pro typefaces
by Sidney Hirschman for the Office of the University Printer.
Printed by GHP Media, Inc., in West Haven, Connecticut



Yale *Henry Koerner Center*

