

# CURRÂNT





# IRVING MARCUS: A WAY WITH MAYHEM

by John Fitz Gibbon

Will success spoil Irving Marcus? A whole lot of people don't ask themselves this question because a whole lot of people never heard of Irving Marcus. You can prove this: Go up to some nice person standing in the Christmas line at Podesta-Baldocchi. And ask if he has heard of Irving Marcus. The answer will be No! Well, have you heard of Jim Nutt? No . . . . . Joseph Raffael? No.

He has heard of Andy.

Educated people, by and large, are not well-informed about contemporary art. They recognize a handful of the top-40; the rest is just rockandroll. The visitors who paid a dollar to look at each others' backs, heads, and elbows at the Art Institute of Chicago's Monet show did not, with a few exceptions,

stroll into the other galleries to look at the Nutt or, over against a 20' Chairman Mao, the large Alaska landscape by Joseph Raffael. This situation is of no serious moment to Raffael and Nutt, artists already well-regarded in that Andorra or Monaco of the globe that calls itself the art world. Their time to play Monet in the Art Institute will come, and probably within our own lifetimes. From the wrong point of view this same situation could appear a desperate one for Marcus who like many a midwestern fella would happily see his work permanently installed at the Art Institute while he can still climb the steps, and never mind the tour buses from Milwaukee. Marcus grew up in Minneapolis where he was born in May, 1929, within months, that is, of the appearance in this world of Warhol, Robert Indiana, Donald Judd, and Jasper Johns, at least half of whom are known to the lawyer in the foyer of the Opera House after a performance of the S.F. Symphony. Irving Marcus is the same age as Claes Oldenburg. Aside from celebrity, what Irving Marcus doesn't have in common with these artistic co-evals is that 15 or 20 years ago each of them more or less repudiated abstract expressionism, and Irv did not. This made them, and it it cost Irv, as well as several hundred pretty good painters in this country who were left holding the 2nd generation bag.

Marcus' version of ab ex has an unerring orthodoxy about it. He served up 10 years of very acceptable painting, of which *Gored Beetle*, 1963, is a good, late example. He likes to position roughly equivalent masses of dark and light against each other in a ragged surface pattern that is energized in swooping strokes of a generously laden brush. Drama is the essence of these canvases. He will lay down a light area across the top and undercut it with a surging dark mass that promises to topple it into a ravenous maw below. Or, as often, the "heavier" dark area will tend to weigh over the light, threatening it and imparting a sense of impending violence and disaster. These paintings pay full respect to the viscid richness of oil paint cuisine. By the end of his first decade as a professional artist Marcus has a sleeve-full of ab ex strategies: he can and usually does push, wipe, float, scrape, blot, bleed, drip, smear, and trickle the paint until each canvas comes into being as a sustaining record of the combat that took place there. By 1963 we can read a work like *Gored Beetle* in terms of birth struggle and death struggle, and the space of the painting as alluding to macrocosm and microcosm: such is the force of the spiral Marcus has borrowed from as far back as van Gogh, from as far back as Miro of the 20's, and from ab ex passim. Sometimes, it is true, Marcus' struggle has been too taxing, and the canvas itself looks exhausted; sometimes the result is too *reconciled*, and the canvas looks pat, self-satisfied. These misses are occasional. By and large the Marcus paintings of this era are successful realizations of the ab ex ethic. In particular Marcus can wrest a blood-red splotch from a cavernous black surround in such a way as to wrench the sensibilities and open the door to archetypal fears. Taken as a whole, Marcus' paintings in this vein project a tragic sense of existence. The best of them gape like wounds. The Marcus of this period has perceived life as one protracted injury.

The only trouble is, quite a few abstract expressionists had already manifested this vision, or something like it, by the time Marcus began to get good



*Flee the City*, 1974, oil/canvas, 54" x 57"





*Search for a Killer*, 1971, oil/canvas, 62½" x 75". Private Collection; Pilot Hill, Ca.



photography: George Lepp



*Gored Beetle*, 1963, oil/canvas, 46" x 49"

at it, including quite a number of Irving's own demi-generation. Quality, aesthetic quality, is likely to be high enough in 2nd generation painting; originality, adventure, the sense of transcending boundaries, are likely to be negligible. The truth that art is personality is perhaps more evident for ab ex than for any other movement in art history. At least the myth of personality, of establishing an identity by telling all, by putting it all down on the canvas, all the unmistakable traces of self going in there stroke by stroke—at least this myth of painting the self *in* unabashedly, exposing all, at least this myth of the idiosyncratic self is greater for ab ex. Then it turned out that abstract expressionism could sustain no more personalities in the movement than, say, impressionism. By 1964 there was a certain Marcus-ness to the work of an artist who had moved to the Coast and was teaching at Sacramento State. Irv had turned into himself in the approved ab ex(istential) manner. But that self was obviously in the shadow of greater and prior artists. There was nothing in Irv, the elegance of his "handwriting" notwithstanding, that people couldn't have gotten earlier, fancier, and, all things considered, more exquisitely, in Guston.

How all this happened to Marcus has a real fascination since there must be a whole foothill range of talented, dedicated, and unlucky American artists born right around 1925-30 for whom his story is a virtual theme. Marcus went to Minnesota (B.A. 1950) where the teacher who meant most to him was Ray Parker, then working in a style that slightly recalls Karl Knaths' decorative *modrenism*, but, like many another in art history—Boccioni, for instance—teaching concepts that ran a little ahead of his practice. Parker didn't show up in Marcus' training until the undergraduate artist had received what is usually called a sound academic schooling. From Parker, Irv received what at this distance seem to us the hoariest abstract expressionist verities—the maculate but nonetheless inviolable picture plane, the equation of size with heroism, etc. etc. He also got a sense of how art can and should help the world. These teachings were absolutely fresh to Marcus and his fellow



*Field Workers*, 1967, oil/canvas, 60" x 51 1/2"





photography: George Less

*Horse Falls Jumping*, 1975, oil/canvas, 62" x 98"

students at Minnesota. Dore Ashton in her recent book on the N.Y. School has observed that the influential teachings of Hans Hofmann—that guiding force in the development of a New York School—mark no advance at all over what went on in the way of theoretical discussion in Hofmann's own student days in the circle of Matisse. She is talking about the ideas of how to activate space, primarily by coloristic means. The very ideas that awakened Kirchner and Jawlensky and that, unimproved, fell on the innocent ears of Clement Greenberg and Lee Krasner at Hofmann's classes in the late 30's, penetrated Irving Marcus' earmuffs in Minneapolis around 1950.

At this writing Minneapolis is one of the truly civilized American cities and if you go to the Walker and to the Institute of the Arts' contemporary section you can get all the education in post-1945 art that an aspiring painter needs. Marcus didn't have that advantage. There wasn't much post-war art in 1950 and what there was wasn't in Minneapolis. Marcus made do with the two Degas at I.A., one of which, of children, is superb; and with the *Lucretia* (if recollection serves) of Rembrandt, one of the very few artists in history successfully to heap up paint relief-like, until it resembles a lava flow, without sacrificing illusionism. Out of Rembrandt, Marcus developed the viscous sur-



face quality of his ab ex paintings and, eventually, in his recent painting, Rembrandt is again the source of his efforts to texture color without cancelling illusionary depth. The first enthusiasms of artists are significant, not merely because at 20 the soul expands like an opening umbrella, but because the problems of art are always the same and the first time one runs them through, runs them through, and runs them through again in the effort to understand Degas' solution, in the effort to follow what Ray Parker is saying about Matisse, that is the time that tracks are laid down in the mind, and all subsequent information will pass that way. From Degas, Marcus derives both his fondness for oblique composition and his interest in pastel, but these tendencies don't surface until after his 10 year apprenticeship to ab ex. Ray Parker is the immediate influence on Marcus in the early years, not so much in terms of the look of Irv's paintings as in terms of Irv's outlook. Meanwhile Parker is off to New York, developing rapidly through a 2nd generation ab ex phase and moving on toward the halfway house between ab ex and color field painting that his painting still occupies today. Parker made his step by clarifying his color, raising his scale, and reducing the ornamentation of the picture plane to a haiku bareness of one or two elements only. In the vast spiral staircase of art history it is a small step. By its measure the distance between say, Guston, and, say Jack Bush, can be calculated. But it is a step and it can hold the weight of many artists yet to come. For Irving Marcus the possibility of taking your own step was established. Someone he knew well had done it.



*Dying Mountain Lion*, 1973, oil/canvas, 64" x 86"

In the concomitant period Irv had put two years into an M.F.A. at Iowa, done time in Korea, bounced off New York a couple of times without leaving so much as a graffito, taught printmaking and painting at Oberlin and some

smaller places in the Midwest, and finally settled at Sacramento. It was a job. And it was probably an evasion of responsibility to his own work. Sacramento wasn't even the *small* apple. It was barely a seed, if that, in the eyes of the art world. Irv could grow roses, and join the faculty club at Sac State. Irv is a bit unlucky, though. Turns out that Thiebaud and Ramos had just passed through the place. Ralph Goings was one of Irv's first "pupils," with "students" like Frank Owen, Richard Jackson, and Ken Waterstreet just coming along. Instead of a no-pressure situation, Marcus found himself in the classroom with artists who were going for the top. It is a familiar scenario in art history. Sometimes the teacher just closes off and dwindles away. He is there but he no longer exists except in his own delusion of himself. Sometimes he collapses his own art and embraces the vision of a brilliant pupil. Sometimes he feeds off the ambitions which surround him and trumps them by a sudden raising of his own work to a new plateau of excellence. Marcus responded, by turns, to the second and third of these options. In the mid-sixties he abandoned his abstract expressionist manner to work in a style closely resembling the lurid *commedia dell'arte* figurative expressionism of Jack Ogden, a recent student and just then a beginning colleague on the art staff. The two artists had grown close and for Marcus the slightly younger painter was a haven in a time when he had come to doubt the premises of his own style. The generously scaled and very *comme il faut* action painting on the order of *Gored Beetle* no longer seemed to Marcus a proper vehicle for showing the human concern which is at the center of his and every other good painter's art and life. His work had begun to look *comme il faut* to him in a bad sense, not to mention *deja vu*, not to mention *vieux jeu*, and even, since he can get some amusement out of it now that he couldn't at the time, *deuxieme cru*. In other words the work no longer meant anything to him, he had to change.

In the first oil pastels angular expressionist figure-performers tilt about in the murk of an up-slanting, stage-lit space. The muddy and sulphurous color derives partly from Ogden, partly from Marcus' own darkling ab ex. These are narrative drawings without any narrative—defeated action is their content. Small and glowing with a low-wattage nastiness, their overall mood is one of claustrophobic fear and frustration. In some, Marcus has the motley protagonists floundering; affectingly suggesting his own crisis. The episode is not the brightest spot of Marcus' career. But he was disciplining himself to drawing the figure as he had not done since undergraduate days, he was discovering the properties of oil pastel, and most of all he was keeping his hand in, just a-borrowing from his friend and waiting for the light to go on. And if the light should never come, then there is some attraction in failure, something consoling in the idea of failing, as in that wish for death which, always an undercurrent in human life, is often expressed in art. In art, the promise of death is a promise of the cessation of nausea, so failure can be comforting, almost welcome; and success can be hard and taxing like any responsibility. In Marcus, as in any artist who isn't simply scared witless, there was some ambivalence about winning.

One supposes that Marcus knew exactly where he was and that to himself at least he admitted it. He had the 2nd generation, pushin' forty blues and he had a nagging memory or two. For example he could remember old Cameron Booth teaching at Minnesota during a brief Marcus G.I. bill sojourn at the grad school, Irving just marking time after Korea. Booth like to inveigh against artist copy-cats and camp-followers. He regarded any artist without a strong personal vision as self-deluded, and as presiding officer at Minneapolis meetings of Artists' Equity—the going organization then—he loved to ding out prospective members who hadn't done anything really by remarking, Has he



done anything really? Irving and Jim Rosenquist, just starting out then, thought a lot of Booth.

Even a conscience twinger like Booth in the back of his mind was not enough to keep Irving from a last-ditch attempt to regroup his bad luck and prevent himself from growing into an important artist. He had two strategies left. They are related, and the second one back-fired badly, virtually destroying Marcus' chances to fail. The first thing he did was to become department chairman at Sacramento State. This allowed him to show that he was a good

photography / George Lepp



*Call for Bids*, 1973, oil/canvas, 51" x 78"

administrator, which he was, and gave him the reputation, after a while, of being a byzantine wielder of power, which he may have been, and it gave him the opportunity of staying away from his studio as much as possible because of always being loaded down with a lot of meaningless crap like how much to allocate for minor capital outlay and other stuff that will never get you into the Art Institute of Chicago. After a time Irv had to go as chairman, but at a number of Northern California colleges the word was out that Irv might be a helluvaguytarunthedeptment. And, even though his painting had begun to pick up and he was starting to think he might have his own little something after all, Marcus, Irving Marcus, as apprehensive as the next human being, was attentive to these siren calls. Reason prevailed; he stayed in the studio.

What picked up Irv's painting was the sudden release of blowsy high-keyed color, breath-catching and spendthrift in its completely unprepared-for beauty. A lot of determined fiddling with oil pastel finally had broken the dam, the new oil paintings followed in the wake, and a lyricism bursts through that is Avery-esque in character and in quality. One is tempted to ascribe the breakthrough in color to a most unlikely source: Irv's painting had acquired a sense of humor in Sacramento. In his ab ex hey-day the ironist in Irv the man had been read out of Irv the painter by the doctrinaire need, exacerbated in a 2nd generation artist, to

present a tragic view of things. Now, among other influences, contact with Ogden's zany Magic Theatre of the imagination, and with their friend Ramos' deadpan wit, had brought off a major change. It was possible to continue to view life the way we live it as mostly vile and pointless without having to present this insight, under the form of paint spread on canvas, as portentous, darksome and overwhelming. The rhetorical, dark-against-light compositions of Irv's ab ex period are a first casualty of this new thinking. A first consequence, evident in *Field Workers*, 1967, is lush, unrestrained colorism, so pretty that it is almost too pretty, but understandable as an outpouring after a long repression, and, as sheer happiness in one's own gift, altogether understandable indeed. It is the work of an artist who has gotten all the mud out.

The broom of irony sweeps clean and to preserve the new painting from the charge of too easy a surrender to too easy and gauzy a beauty, Marcus decided to complicate matters by choosing his imagery from the rich mine of human comedy provided by newsphotos from the daily paper. Newsphotos supply a low-grade image, "low-rent" enough to dispel any fine art connotation. By using wire-service photos for his ostensible subject-matter Marcus could maintain a "tough" attitude within the picture while indulging to satiety his new-found taste for delectable, highly arbitrary color. Meaning peach and fluffy orange and drifts of raspberry and collisions of lemon-yellow and cerise, and diaphanous phosphates of lime. In a disciplined reaction to Irving's one-time paint-slinging these much more delicious canvases of 1967-69 are painted very thin. Yet space is still constructed according to tensions between warm and cold hues, according to Hofmannesque push-pull, that is. Which is to say space is still construed according to Matisse. Marcus puts a coolish blue around a crimson patch of shirtfront and a fieldworker leaps to dimensionality. One remembers that Parker, when he stepped toward the unknown, had launched himself from the late Matisse of the cut-outs (and, possibly, from the murals at the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia). Irv's ab ex period hadn't really resembled Parker's painting; it was *information* he'd mainly gathered. Now, it almost began to seem that Marcus, following Parker to Matisse for a cue, had perhaps launched himself only sideways, landing—a bit grander in scale, a bit more sardonic (the photos), but landing decorously all the same on Milton Avery's ample square. True, there is little to choose between these artists' conceptions of an anchorless color-space in resonances of contrasting hues, each lightened with white. In fact it's hard to think of sunnier canvases which float color more buoyantly than those found in late Avery, in Parker of the 60s, and in the sherbert sweetness of Marcus around 1968. Still, it is Matisse who wags this tail. Onto late-show Fauvism Marcus has tacked his slightly raunchier late-late show. It is beautiful. It is the 4 A.M. of Fauvism—no one will see it.

Yet it is too soon for congratulations or condolences. Marcus is not done. The paintings of 1969-1970 have a different, tighter look. Marcus' approach to the projected photograph isn't too free anymore; the newsphoto is no longer a mere pretext for a pushmepulyu joust with color. By readjusting the values within the photo, by arbitrary color, and by placing equal emphasis on the shallower abstract shapes which convey interior modelling, Marcus has learned to depreciate contours to the point where his figures are drawn out absolutely flat in the plane. The result is a taut surface pattern of interlocking torn shapes which are always arranging themselves tightly on a single plane, and always retreating into different degrees of depth according to the photo convention. All photo painting works this way, of course, and so does all illusionistic painting (according to a convention perfected in the Renaissance), but Marcus' picture plane is tight as the *Mill Valley Mafia*\* and his figures are





Stain Guerillas, 1973, oil/canvas, 69" x 101 1/2"

flatter and less haptic than any artist now using the photo, and as flat as any color painter in the tradition of (and including) Titian.

There is more. Marcus' color has abandoned all sympathy with nature, all lyrical sweetness, appetitiveness and dreamy driftiness; and has grown cynical, searing, bizarre, acrid, biting, and clangorous. Color is put on full strength, without the nuance and grading of his ab ex days, and it scintillates with a screaming intensity. It is evident that Marcus wishes to set fire to the Art Institute with his cobalts, cinnabars, etc. Only they are fluorescent orange, bright magenta, etc. No one has seen color like this, not in Avery, not in Matisse, not even in Derain. These colors fairly shriek. It is not entirely pleasant at first. But what new contribution to thinking-seeing is?

After a while one recognizes what is special in this color. One has, after all, seen it before. In oil pastel. Marcus has somehow learned to simulate the glowing, screechy-wavelength appearance of oil pastel in oil paint. On canvas and at a certain scale it is a *tour de force*. Irv is applying this color to photos that now run to an explicit subject matter, namely, human inanition: one of those themes that can last an artist a lifetime. There is no limit to human folly, as no one needs to be told, so Marcus had to concentrate his attention on a manageable arena. Most of the paintings since 1970 have been devoted to man's false relations with animals. It's the people who are usually beastly. There's always a picture in the paper about a cat jumping from the upper story of a burning building; a horse has fallen into a swimming pool; cats are

being judged at a show; a man at a microphone holds a turtle upside down by the tail—it's a pet auction; a girl walks an ocelot on a leash. The irony in these situations is already present. The artist just points to them. What can you say when you see the trick-riders section of the local sherriff's posse pushing their horses up the ramp onto a train bound for an out-of-town engagement? Horses are not supposed to ride on trains. It's unnatural. A false relation.

Animals can behave badly, stupidly and selfishly in Irv's work as well. Take the dog yap-yapping like *dogdumb* at that vacuous paperboy on his bike. It's a typical-horrible ranchstyle development and the bubblegum pink of the street is for characterizing the neighborhood and it's for the paperboy, but that dog is an idiot too! There are a number of stupid animals—Irv is not "a Sacramento animal-painter", really: he feels no mystical kinship (at least it doesn't show in the work). Mostly the non-humans are just trying to make the best of a bad situation that is going to get worse. The dignified mountain lion who has been run over by a car on Interstate 80 and lies dying at roadside is not the real subject of Irv's painting. It's the highway patrolman, not in the photo, whose first thought was to hoglie the cat.



Roar Down, 1975, oil/canvas, 58" x 78"

The trashiness of human behavior is conveyed by the slurred and distorted shapes inherent in newsphoto reproduction. The exaggeratedly foreshortened limbs, misshapen torsos, simian and reptilian countenances that often result from the wire photo process form a kind of readymade expressionism which the artist is alert to assist. We feel that in the original photo the policemen who are using their German shepherds to make a bust cannot have been so brutal seeming and allee-oop-ish. Part of Irv's intention, of course, is to show

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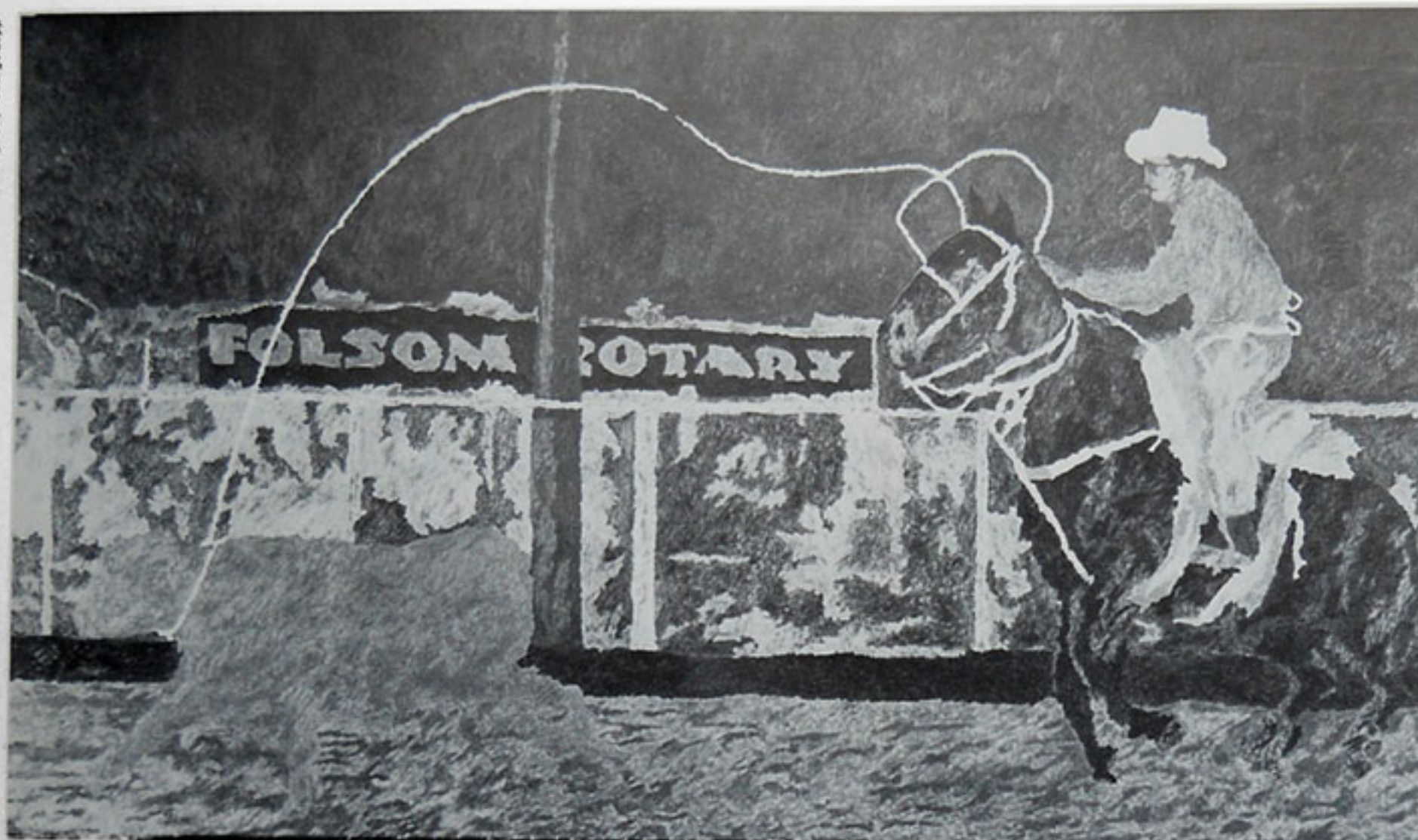




*Train That Derailed*, 1975, oil/canvas, 63 1/2" x 84"



photography/George Lepp



*A Calf in Folsom*, 1975, oil/canvas,  
59 1/2" x 102"

how much prior experience we contribute to our seeing. We pretty much know what Ronald Reagan looks like, and when we see him in the paper we add our prior knowing and that's how we "see". Marcus just sticks with the 2-dimensional information in the paper; thus he gets away with mayhem.

The first 20 or so paintings in this series began with a small freehand pencil sketch of the newsphoto to arrive at a more speaking value arrangement. The fundamental shapes might be urged along a little towards a sharpened equilibrium, as the confirmed ab ex hand gets into something interesting the way it can happen in a drawing. The graphite drawing would then be projected and one or sometimes two oil pastels made on its model, to work out the color relations. Then Irving turns the better pastel into a large oil, which might take 2-3 months to paint.

Late in the 60s, but not too late, in company with Rosenquist, Lichtenstein and Warhol, Irv Marcus looked around America and saw a lot of trash and bad relationships of all kinds, and just a generally reduced quality of life. They all kept it mainly to America because it is more polite to see the trash in your own backyard and

because the artist is a kind of undercover patriot who watches out for right relations and tries to have a sense of humor about the wrong ones. A chimp confronts a child in one of Irv's paintings in such a way as to suggest an equivalence. Breughel's two fettered apes look out on his city of Antwerp, and his Children's Games are not for fun, because he saw adults as merely bigger children and their activities as contemptible and inane. Once Irving Marcus stood on the sensitive ab ex heights and looked down and saw holocaust. Now he just opens the paper and sees a family of cretins who've been flooded out along with their hapless dog. These poor people did it to themselves; next time they will settle in blithely next to a volcano. Such is Irv's version of the human family. It has the black makings of a comedy.

The best published account of Andy Warhol's painstaking, to give his images a trashy, off-hand quality, is David Antin's, quoted in Leo Steinberg's *Other Criteria*. Andy's work is about loss of sensitivity and reduction of standards, it isn't, as some think, an example of them. Loss of humaneness and a diminishing potential for the national life are also the subjects of Irving Marcus. Irv chooses a trashy



subject in a trashy format and proceeds to wring it for irony by conferring on its enduring cheapness and ephemerality the condition of a fine art object. His metaphors he shares with Rosenquist, Warhol and others, but his means are now his own, while his vision of breakdown and disaster remain what they always were.

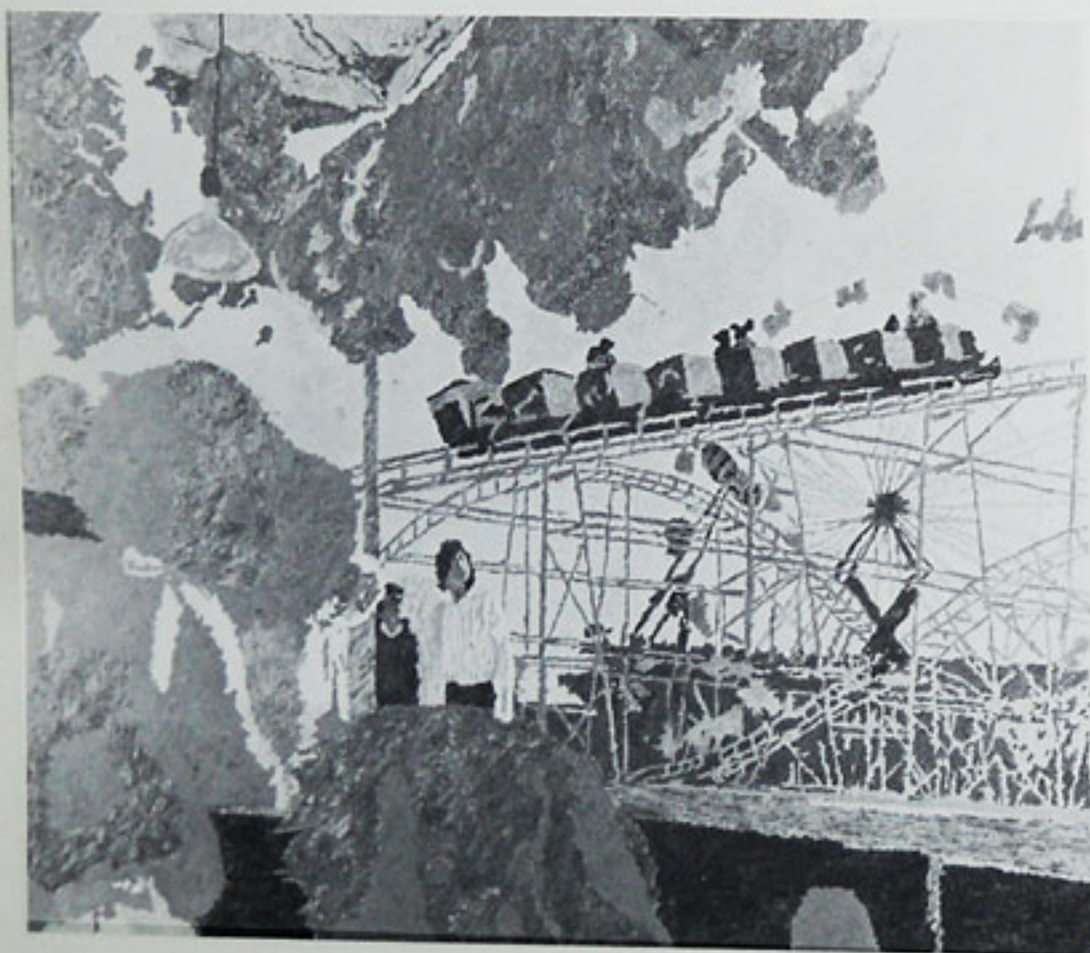
The control Irving now has over his shimmering sets of primary and secondary color must be seen at first hand for proper evaluation. The subtle color nuances of his ab ex are replaced by a gestalt of color associations no less complex in its statement of theme and variation. Though the newer work features more brilliant intensities than ever, Irving manages to hold his color down by keeping the values close. When color goes more contrasty—as in the recent, ambitious *Folsom Rodeo*, 1975, Irv is in danger of losing the painting. Here the classicizing format doesn't help either. Irv's figures have virtually no plasticity; the world doesn't need an unsculpturesque David. Generally, though, as in a painting of gawking teenagers wasting time at the Fair, Marcus knows just when to back off from a blazing red vs. blue conjunction before one's eyeballs are knocked out. In the cooler keyed large painting (see cover) of Reagan and a bureaucrat resting their horses in the forest (they are on a 100 mile "socialite" ride through the Sierras) Marcus' use of transparencies to create light beneath the surface is as masterful as one has seen. The governor is dehumanized by the original photo (though as usual he bravely keeps his chins up) and is flattened further, up against the jigsaw *craquelure*; but the artist again leads us to the decision that Reagan's done this to himself. In this out-of-doors scene Irv stays off earth colors. He seldom works from the tube; different values yield a large garden of greens from perhaps four

kinds of green. Impastoed areas of one value of green are played against a much more thinly painted light green. He rarely adds white now, but thins the colors with an extender that is crucial to his achievement of the new and sizzling look of oil pastel. Black has been banished since shortly after the first efflorescence of color in 1967. White is present along the perimeters of the canvas as an interior frame mimicking the paper surround of the oil pastel (which mimicks the column margin in the newsphoto). As in Seurat or Olitski this border serves as "real" drawing along the edges—enforcing our awareness of the painting as illusion, as imaginary windowview. Above all it works as a foil to the color, as a color-index. You "look up" any color in the composition by reference to the white.

Has he really done anything? It would be graceless, as well as untrue, to deny it. With ruin staring him in the face Irv failed to take advantage of it. The comfortable oblivion of being a good administrator, a "great" teacher, an asset to the college was his, and he dropped it. He has now exhibited paintings that cannot be bagged with anybody's second generation. They have the look of Irving Marcuses and they have the indispensable something to say, conveyed by the indispensable fresh means. Now these are not the best paintings the world has seen. They lack still that sense found in the best art of there being much more there when it has all been explained away. But they are good enough to hang in the Art Institutes across the land in b. 1929 company, and they demand to be seen in N- Y---, now, and not to be overlooked any longer. Irving Marcus' new paintings owe to Matisse what Warhol owes: everything, nothing. They owe what Raffael owes to Rubens, Nutt to Ingres. Irv's paintings do far more than recover for us a disparaged area of seeing—the newsphoto. With every further attainment in his color and his paint handling (and his paint quality goes up, picture by picture) the tragicomic gap widens between the debasement and triviality of the depicted experience and the quality and humanity that the refinement of a sensibility like Irv's makes you think are possible still. The same bitter irony is to be found in the pictures of Ralph Goings, and of Breughel, and of a few other artists. The vision is always comparable because the facts of human life remain the same. From these facts every artist projects either an optimistic view of the human outlook, founded on right relations in contradistinction to what we have now or he takes a despairing view, distanced by irony (as in late Marcus) or not (as in early Marcus), based always on the schlock we are made of.

Late in 1969 Irving Marcus walked into one of those important faculty meetings at Sac State where the usual thing was probably at stake, like how to keep the slide librarian from reading the newspaper all day. Marcus sat down somewhere between Jim Nutt and Joseph Raffael. After a while he observed that a large number of the most noted artists living in Northern California were in the same room, and he reflected that he had hired most of them, so that some good art could come out of Sacramento where he, Irving, lived. The absurdity of this must have hit him just about then and there with everybody's elbows on the table. He realized that he had done it to himself, that he was destined to fail to fail. He would be a success. It would be a lot of work and a much greater responsibility than being department chairman or dean. Like Joseph he would no longer care about Art Institutes here and there because he would be making work he himself could stand on, his own Marcus square. He got down to work. Now, late in 1975, he realizes that as far as most of the world is concerned he is still as famous as Joseph and Jim or anyone else but Andy; and this gives him a little more needed time to make the work that will help people see what is out there a little more clearly. Because he would like to contribute as much as the next man to this project.

photography / George Lepp



*Only Pennies Away*, 1974, oil/canvas, 54" x 62½"



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Marcus' color really does shriek like nothing ever heard before in art—the vibrations are bizarre—and when it is all boiled down, that is why he can't be kept out any more. To see his paintings is to recall seeing color TV for the first time . . . it is a first visit to the Las Vegas strip. In the Reagan painting the present rings like a telephone that won't shut up. What precisely does this extraordinary color imply? It implies the same old things. Anxiety, deep anxiety, confirmed in the crabbed, tense, nervous handling. Anxiety, world-madness, holocaust, suffering Jesus. The same old thing. People keep doing it to themselves. We are the authors of our own blight. The world could be better, people could be a lot better, and one day they both will be. This is the promise of art. In the meantime human society is dismaying. Judging from the history of art this is a truth that's been around a long time and Irving Marcus' paintings represent one more fine strategy for learning how to go on living with it. **J.F.G.**

\*The solidarity of this sodality of excellent artists living in more or less rural Marin County is well known locally and has earned for them this teasing sobriquet.

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