Essay by Lennart Anderson, 1983

My father held on to his job at Ford in Detroit during the Depression. He was a pattern-maker and Ford was developing the V-8. When we moved into a large brick house around 1931, there was an alcoholic saw-filer and his wife living in one of the apartments. I discovered him drawing one day—a picture of a worker chained to his bench—a drawing I remember to this day. I also recall my mother, to amuse my brother and me, copying Johnny Walker in pencil from a newspaper ad. She has always encouraged me. When my older brother brought his drawings back from kindergarten—strange little people with big foreheads walking in houses with the sides off so you could see inside—I copied those, too. I betrayed no ability or imagination, just desire. In school, my first art teacher looked at me in wonder when I showed her the drawings of collie dogs and windjammers. I begged to be let into the special art class after school, to no avail. My next teacher was pleased to find someone so interested in drawing. She let me into the class. By this time, I was spending Sundays at the art museum. It was there that I learned about Pearl Harbor.

I had been pleading for oil paints for a long time. My father thought only professionals should have them, but when Lewis Art Supply had a fire sale in 1942, I was given a beautiful little wood case with Orpen colors for Christmas. I began to go to the School of Arts & Crafts in 1943 near downtown Detroit on Saturday afternoons, painting from the model. The class was made up mostly of people who were graduates of the school and who wanted to paint from the figure. The atmosphere was very serious, and the teachers, Sarkis Sarkisian and Guy Palazzola, who, with great patience, would bring my broken tones back together, were excellent. The perfect place for a fervent young soul.

I attended Cass Technical High School in Detroit. A curriculum called Commercial Art had been set up to prepare artists for the auto industry. It was a fine school, but I think we suffered some in not getting a rounded education. With the experience Cass provided, scholarships to art school were not difficult to obtain. Mine was to the School of Art Institute in Chicago for September 1946.

The Art Institute was filled with returning GIs. In fact, my class had only two others from high school. I had trouble with the design course. I couldn’t compose with abstract shapes and then put subject matter into them. Nonetheless, I learned a lot from this course—things about pattern, shape, and variety. Almost all of our time was devoted to painting and drawing from the model. But I am afraid we did it in a spirit of marking time. None of us expected to be painting that way when we left school. There was no enthusiastic teaching of the figure that seemed to make it relevant or exciting. The atmosphere wasn’t right for it. I doubt that we would have accepted it in any case.

There were mainly three teachers of painting at the Art Institute in those years. Boris Anisfeld, a painter and stage designer from Russia who was quite famous in the ’20s; Louis Ritman, a painter who spent years in Paris before the war and who knew Soutine; and Paul Wieghardt, from Germany, who taught a kind of Paul Klee-Edouard Jacques Villon sensitivity to color relationships. I ruled out Wieghardt immediately as being too precious, and first enrolled in Anisfeld’s class. He was a stock, powerful man with bangs and a beard. The work done in his

class had color pushed to extremes—very hot, very cold, with a creamy look to the whites. He professed a love for Velázquez, however, and I, taking him at his word, painted very tonally. My work began to attract attention from freshman who would wander into class during the long break. I was embarrassed and would leave the room. Anisfeld became very angry and finally launched into an attack on all my work in front of the class. His complaint was I was not using color. But looking around me, I was not about to use Anisfeld color, so at the end of one semester I left.

I gravitated to Ritman. His class was very relaxed. No one ever found out what Ritman had to teach. I was attracted to the class by Maury Lapp, a student whom I admired, who seemed to set a serious tenor. His sketchbooks were filled with pure expressionism and I ached to paint like Kokoschka, Soutine, and Roualt. This was the time of the gestation of the Chicago Monster school; Leon Golub, Ted Halkin, and Cosmo Compoli were all students at the time. During the last semester, I decided to apply for Cranbrook Academy of Art for an advanced degree.

Cranbrook in 1950 gave a master's degree without requiring any classroom work. Each student was given a place in which to paint or sculpt and was expected to more or less work out his or her own problems. I was told, however, that considering my previous experience I should not work from life. This was no hardship, because I planned to paint expressionistically. I painted a picture of two dried-up red peppers 30'' x 40'', another of a dead baby, another of a female corpse, one of a street scene with men warming their hands over a fire in a trash barrel. I loved painting these pictures. But before the year was out, I realized that expressionism was, for me, a formal approach and one that I was tiring of. With a couple months of school yet to go, I decided to do portraits of the students. I asked $15 apiece so I could be sure of having models. The teacher had the grace to ignore what was going on, since I seemed bent on ignoring his advice about painting from the model. I concentrated on the head, painting them usually in one sitting, with likeness a major consideration. When the semester ended, I had saved $130, enough for my first trip to New York.

When I was in New York I visited a fellow student, whose father had the auction catalogs of Degas' studio students: Hundreds of drawings, pastels, and paintings were reproduced. I was very excited by this austere man, whose work reflected such pain, almost disgust, as well as passion for his goal. His heroic effort to maintain the nude as a noble subject for art inspired me, and still does.

Going back to school in September 1951, I wanted to do a street scene with a figure in the air. Painters once had access to subjects that allowed this routinely. Tintoretto's *Miracle of St. Mark* was a picture that excited me. I wanted in a similar way to get a figure off the ground, unattached and moving. Working on this idea, Zoltan Sepeshy, my instructor, mentioned a famous photograph of a drop of milk splashing into a dish at impact with a symmetrical crown of drops thrown up. I decided to try the painting from that view. I wanted to paint an emotional subject (Manet, after all, painted a suicide) without an expressionist approach, to paint as if I were only an observer. I painted part of the word "stop" in a sign in the distance and included a clergyman turning and running away in the foreground. In the painting, the figure in the air could be compared to paper blowing in the street. Although the subject may be depressing, it was not my

intention to paint a scene of horror, but instead to show the grace of the moment. It was an Italian, not Flemish, martyrdom that I was trying to paint.

After finishing school, I returned to Detroit, renting a tiny servant's room on the top floor of an apartment house overlooking Detroit River. In order to make room to paint, I had to turn my cot on its side. In such a space I devoted myself to small still lifes. But I began to feel that I could not say in Detroit. I could not afford to be a failure there. My father who had worked so hard, was looking on. My painting was too old-fashioned for the town. Also, I knew no other painters to talk to. New York seemed some sort of a solution. I had been reading Fairfield Porter's reviews in *Artnews* and felt they must represent more than a single person's viewpoint. I needed to feel part of a society that supported me emotionally. Even if I didn't particularly take part in it, I wanted to feel that it was there. So in August 1953, I left for New York.

I came to New York with two weavers, Jeanne McIntyre and Ruben Eshkanian, and another painter, Richard Serrin. Jeanne and Ruben opened a weaving and textile shop on Sheridan Square. Richard and I shared a garret on Thirty-Eighth Street around the corner from Lord & Taylor, where we both got jobs, which were to last through the Christmas shopping season. We both hated the work and quit on the same day in October without conferring with each other. We decided to go back home, but to prevent the whole adventure from being a total loss, I decided to try and find a gallery to handle my work. Fairfield Porter had written some reviews for the Davis Gallery on Sixtieth Street, and I thought I should try it; their painters seemed as dull as I was. Mr. Davis was surprised to see work like mine, especially since it came from the Midwest. When he said he couldn't take me solely on what he could see, I told him my plan to go back to Detroit. He said that he thought I should stay in New York. He asked me whether I would stay if he could find a job for me. I said sure. So he picked up the phone and dialed one digit. After a short conversation, he told me to report next morning to Robert Kulicke's, where I would be put to work cutting and joining frames. I said I had absolutely no ability to do that kind of work, but he said not to worry and to just show up. So I started working two and a half days a week and found a room on East Seventy-fourth Street, three blocks from the shop. I took a class with Dickinson, for two months, not long enough to absorb his teaching. I passionately admired his work.

One of the students at Cranbrook who had been kind of supportive to my work was Pat Pasloff. A New Yorker, who had studied with de Kooning at Black Mountain, she had a loft on the famous block on Tenth Street that housed so many Abstract-Expressionists. She held a kind of open house, it was either that or everyone took advantage of her hospitality. There I met the painters Milton Resnick, Esteban Vicente, Aristidemos Kaldis, Landis Lewiten, and an assortment of people that also included writers, dancers, even mathematicians. I was accepted there as a painter, but no one other than Pat and Milton knew what kind of painting I did. Pat wanted me to get more into the swing of things and persuaded Milton to put me up for the Club, a loft on Broadway where on Friday night artists met to hash over whatever seemed to be going on at the time. I remember a long series of panel discussions devoted to "nature," a curious subject for an organization dominated by abstract artists. There was an excitement about these meetings. Reputations seemed to be forming there. I felt attracted and intimidated at the same time. I sometimes wondered whether the idea was to speak for 20 minutes without giving oneself away.

In the summer of 1954, Pat Pasloff found a small loft across the street from hers on Tenth Street, and I moved in. I began painting a street scene in a style reflecting what was then current: Abstract-Expressionalism. The painting ended as a kind of scene emptied of all obvious representational references. When it was all finished, I coated it with white led and began another painting that became *Street Scene 1955-1958*. There were no compositional studies for this painting. I painted for a long time without knowing the final scale of the figures. I did know that I wanted to make a fresco-like painting. The picture, however, is not large, but it seemed large in the small space in which I was working. I worked on the picture for almost four years. In the conventional sense, it is unfinished. While I worked on the picture, it occurred to me that the scene I was depicting was happening on a vanishing point on the horizon and was being viewed through binoculars or a telescope. The space then is brought forward with little change of scale from front to back. The result is a tight, depthless space emphasizing the surface—which coincided with my interest in wall painting.

I stayed in the studio on Tenth Street only one year, leaving it for a small apartment on the top floor of a tenement on Fourth Street with hot water and heat. I now had everything necessary for my life—a part-time job and a place, although small, with a good light in which to work. In the three years I lived on Fourth Street, I worked mostly on five paintings: the street scene, a portrait of Ruben Eshkanian, a portrait of Henry Kowert playing a guitar, a still life with a white pitcher, and a painting of a Victorian boy from an old photograph. Except for my painting from the photograph, these pictures were endlessly changing. Two were left incomplete. The Ruben portrait changed its size three times, finally being pasted down to make use of the canvas nailed to the stretcher. The problem stemmed, I think, from the fact that the backgrounds in these paintings were made up. This meant that I had endless possibilities—a freedom not necessarily to be desired. Degas and de Kooning wrestled with the same dilemma: deciding on the space the subject is to inhabit. Generally, I tend to go for more space, with the figures becoming smaller.

In 1958, after applying for a third time, I was awarded a fellowship to the American Academy in Rome.

Before leaving New York, I took snapshots of storefronts and stoops. The Academy had large studios, I was told, and I wanted to try and paint something large using New York as a setting. Because I needed something to set off the action, I decided on an accident. Looking through my street paintings, there seems to be a theme of youth confronting life in an active way. Much of American painting in the 1940s treated children as a subject, but usually in a sentimental, often stylized manner. I hated that. I liked the fresh note of Degas' youths in his *Spartan Boys Girls at Play*—in fact, I divided my picture between male and female in a tribute to that abortive picture—and the modest, unheroic proportions of the figures in the Halicarnassus frieze. Squaring up a compositional sketch, I began immediately without drawings for the figures. For myself, I fear to much preparation. I did a number of drawings, but all while the painting was in progress. Rome itself inspired me; the ochre walls catching fire late in the afternoon. To catch this I had to adopt a new key. Before Rome, my pictures had been cool; from Rome on, they tended to be warm.

In 1959, visiting Greece, I began to paint landscapes, adopting, as I understood it, Edwin Dickinson's approach, that of painting a quick glance.

When I returned to America in 1961, I began teaching. As a starting point I decided to go back to Dickinson's teacher, Charles Hawthorne. I had read *Hawthorne on Painting* in high school and was attached to his view that nature is best approached through color relationships rather than drawing. I have given his idea my own start over the years, emphasizing value over color. Teaching has made a big difference in my work, I think. The rigors of responding to so many setups in each class could not help but make for a thinking eye.

I finally had my first exhibition—at the Tanager Gallery on Tenth Street in 1962. Looking at why work together, I decided to stop painting from my head. The forms in my large street scene seemed flatter than in the previous one. I am sure my teaching was pulling me toward painting from direct observation. I call this "humble pie." Conceptual painting is "pie in the sky."

I worked from still lifes, single figures, and landscapes through the ’60s. Gradually, however, what I was learning began to encourage me to think again of painting "pie in the sky." I was looking at Corot less and more at Giotto and other fresco painters.

In 1970, I began working on another street scene. I was inspired by a Pompeian painting of a street scene in which the characters are all looking away from each other. The atmosphere is electric with mistrust because it is clear everyone is aware of everyone else. My painting would be vertical this time, with only four figures and a dog and the composition on a slight diagonal. I had a. Terrible time painting the boy hanging off the post. No model could hold the pose and a photo was not feasible. Nailing a small stretcher on a door to hold on to and looking in a mirror, I began posing. Being at an angle myself made measuring an impossibility. Finally, after two years, I thought of squaring off the mirror and squaring off my drawing paper. Where I crossed a line on the mirror I made a corresponding mark crossing the proper line on my paper. Then, connecting these intersections, I found I had a figure.

With this picture I freed myself of the dogmas of working from life or working from my imagination exclusively. Although I tend to work on one picture at a time, I don't feel I have to be true to one mode or to the other.

Someone has said that you spend your life learning what you knew in the first place. I have always considered myself essentially a tonal painter. That is, I tend to find a tone (basically a value) from which the other tones in the picture are found. This approximates what one sees in the motif (nature) and supports a conviction that one is painting what one sees. In *Still Life With Aluminum Kettle*, however, I discovered how extremely limited the value range is in a painting as against that which occurs in nature. It is obvious when one thinks about it. After all, a painting is essentially one plane and will reflect the light that is falling on it. It can darkened or lightened with paint, it is true, but the picture will always remain one plane, place in one way in relation to the light. Nature, however, has no such limitation. Light strikes the kettle here, slides by, and barely seeps under the paper plate there. It was my task to try to get the feeling of this vast range of tones on this one plane.

Tonal painting is naturally suited to simple surfaces usually closely related in terms of value and color, achieving a feeling of continuity and wholeness. One of the problems with atonalism,

however, is that it is so difficult to deal with patterns. This is because patterns cannot be generalized and resist simplification. They are made up of equal voices and they must be treated as such. However, such passages lend a richness, a musical quality.

One afternoon in the middle of the ’50s, I decided to paint a little everyday picnic scene. I changed it soon after I began, when it occurred to me that I really wanted to paint a bacchanal. Probably there is an irony here—that I used an Abstract-Expressionist attitude (change your painting in a flash) to paint the arch traditional subject. The painting took about an hour to paint. I wasn’t sure what to think of it. It came so easily that I decided it wasn’t mind. It was a gift from somewhere. My little bacchanal became my favorite picture. I packed it in the trunk when I left for Rome and hung it wherever I lived. It was a tounge-in-check version of a type of painting I loved above all others: Raphael’s *Galatea*, Titian’s companion pictures *Bacchus and Ariadne* and *The Andrians*, certain Poussins, and Ingres’ wall painting *The Age of Gold*. I thought of it as a sketch for a painting I most wanted to do but never would. I couldn’t dare such a fiasco. The nude figure it action? Sunlight? Water? Landscape?

By the 1970s, after so much time teaching from the model, I knew I must try it. Stretching three large canvases, I decided to paint with acrylics. I knew these paintings would probably be endlessly revised, and though I hadn’t painted with plastic, I knew that medium could be worked over and over without endangering its permanence. Also, I liked the idea of a water-based paint lending the lighter key of fresco. My only change for success, I felt, was to set an amiable tone and to maintain it. To think of the painting as something effervescing and not final.

I started the first picture by reversing the sketch, hoping that new material would naturally occur. The second painting was taken directly from the sketch, and the third (still being worked on) was based on a combination of the first two paintings with some new ideas.

I finally settled on *Idylls* as a title for these pictures. This freed them from any iconographic responsibilities that attach to *Bacchanal* or *Arcadia*. I had included a little toy steamboat in the original sketch deliberately to frustrate any attempt to place this scene in ancient times. Titian did a similar thing when he included women in contemporary dress in *The Andrians*. Matisse comes to mind when thinking of more recent attempts at such a subject. His *Lux, Calme et Volupté* has no overt contemporary clues. Style alone makes it clear it is a modern picture.

I conceived of these pictures as passive decorations—pictures that stay on the wall and seduce only if one is of a mind to be seduced. I like to think of them shaded by some loggia near a swimming pool with wet pavement, plants, and sunlight.

I do my best. I am anxious not to fool myself. If my work is received with pleasure, I am gratified. If not, I can’t help it.

Looking back, I think the direction I took in 1951 had more to do with criticism of the representational painting being done in America at that time than it did with abstraction. The painting that has meant the most. To me has always had its elements of realism without necessarily being characterized as such: Titian and Ingres spring to mind. It is the tactile identification of paint with form that is satisfying to me. That is a long way from the abject

realism that is around us today, however. Nature resists being copied; it flattens and dries out under that approach. I have learned that I must be prepared to be surprised if I'm going to approach nature in its lair. It continually surprises me. For me as a painter, nature is not an apple, but how an apple is seen in its surroundings. Nature has a way of making liaisons between even very disparate elements, and it is my delight when I discover how it accomplishes this.

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