

Community Gallery, The Brooklyn Museum

# INTERIOR EXTERIOR

## FIGURATIVE ARTISTS OF PARK SLOPE

April 27-June 8, 1980

This exhibit will travel to Henry Street Settlement, Louis Abrons Arts for Living Center, New York City,  
OCTOBER – NOVEMBER 1980.

Lennart Anderson  
Bob Bidner  
June Blum  
Jerome Burns  
Josephine Burns  
Ronnie Carson  
Eddie Earl Cato  
Cynthia Dantzic  
Harvey Dinnerstein

Simon Dinnerstein  
Gail Cohen Edelman  
Audrey Frank  
George Hildrew  
Harriet Holden-Nash  
Arthur Levine  
Marion Lerner Levine  
Pat Mainardi  
Ellen McCall

Diane Miller  
Susan Newmark  
Elias Rivera  
Shunji Sakuyama  
Ben-Zion Shechter  
Laura Shechter  
Susanna Steig  
Don Stern

**“Interiors and Exteriors, Figurative Artists of Park Slope”** was conceived as a result of our observations that many professional realist artists were living here and using the immediate setting of this brownstone community as their subject matter. While their work varies from styles of precise realism to those of expressionism and idealism, all content emanates from the enclosed space of home or studio to the wider settings of street and park. Park Slope is unique both in its proximity to New York art centers and its quiet non-pressured atmosphere. We feel that this exhibit further examines the relationship between artist and environment and also adds a valuable dimension to current trends in figurative art.

co-curators:  
Susan Newmark Fleminger  
Laura Shechter

### INTRODUCTION PARK SLOPE: AN OVERVIEW

Park Slope, Brooklyn derives its name and character from its peculiar geographic situation; its apex is the 562-acre Prospect Park, from whence it “slopes” down to the waters of New York harbor, only one mile away.

The area boasts a colorful history that dates back to the Revolutionary War. The Battle of Long Island was fought here in August 1776, one of the first engagements of the war. The British, with a large number of ships massed in the harbor, attacked and routed George Washington’s Continental Army. Infantrymen marched along routes that we now call First Street, and Fifth Avenue, which was then known as a route to the Gowanus River.

Commanding views of the surrounding land and waters gave the slope strategic importance. One of the highest of these hills, Mount Prospect, stood in what is now Grand Army Plaza. At that time, and until the mid-19th century, the area was rolling farmland.

In the 1850s, a street grid was imposed here, necessitating the demolition of houses unfortunately situated at the new intersections. Home building began in the district in the same decade, and plans for a “Mount Prospect Park”, to follow in the footsteps of the successful Central Park, were proposed by 1860. The Civil War interceded, however, after which new, expanded plans by appointed landscape architects Olmstead and Vaux were accepted. Olmstead, incidentally, suggested allocating land to the park’s east for cultural institutions, a suggestion that led ultimately to the creation of the Brooklyn Museum and the Grand Army Plaza Library at their present sites.

Building of the park in the late 1860s inspired the rapid development of the residential “rowhouse suburb” to its west. Accessible to Manhattan first via the horsecar trolleys that plied Flatbush Avenue and connected to the Fulton St. Ferry, and then via the Brooklyn Bridge (opened in 1883), rural Park Slope was the site of a building boom that began in the 1850s, stopped for the Civil War and then briefly for the Panic of 1873, and continued until World War I.

The architecture of the area reflects the popularity of certain styles during the time period. The houses range from Italianate, Second French Empire, neo-Grecian, Romanesque Revival and Queen Anne styles to the eclectic classical styles popular after the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. Reflecting the latter as well is the style of the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch and its accompanying Doric Columns at Grand Army Plaza.

Since building was accomplished in lots, the long residential blocks are often clusters of different styles, with their attendant variations in trim, masonry veneer, staircases, roofs and cornices. The rowhouses provide visual feasts of details, color and texture, all accomplished in the gentle scale of two-and-three-story high structures.

Today, Prospect Park remains the heart and inspiration of the district. One can still see ships glide by in the harbor from the park, a view that combines the area’s unique assets of distinguished architecture, water and greenery. To many residents of the Slope, the working boundaries of the district are the meeting of Flatbush Ave. and St. Marks Place to the north, the six-lane Fourth Avenue to the west, Bartel-Pritchard Square and 15th Street to the south, and the park on the east.

The area’s notable boundaries, including radiating star traffic circles at the north and south, help concentrate and circulate the residents and facilities therein, and give Park Slope a sense of definition. Movement within the area means use, appreciation and enjoyment.

The placement of subway stations and the location of active commercial strips along the short avenue blocks also serve to ensure movement within the area. The central Seventh Avenue commercial strip is Park Slope’s spine, and focal point. Houses line the long ribs on both sides. Stores of all types, bars, restaurants, artisans studios and galleries provide diversity and activity. Since the Slope area extends only two blocks east of the spine and three blocks west, everyone is close to it and involved with it. Seventh Avenue’s rustic rather than chic character is owed to the rural nature of the nearby park.

The Fifth Avenue commercial strip, two blocks west, one of the longest and most intense in Brooklyn, is the site of a greater mixture of enterprises, and contributes further to Park Slope’s activity and diversity. One must keep passing through the Slope, a walker’s paradise, to use its facilities. The neighborhood’s visual attributes become part of one’s daily life.

Park Slope naturally defined, enhanced by architectural diversity, a heterogeneous population and well-located facilities, adjacent to a number of esthetic resources (the park, The Brooklyn Museum, Grand Army Plaza library, Brooklyn Botanic Gardens) is thus an area of which Jane Jacobs would approve as a successful urban environment and has the ingredients of visual engagement and inspiration that artists need. Its ambience of revitalization (the area declined after World War II and the rush to the suburbs, when brownstones became “unfashionable”) is a further motivating factor. It’s perhaps no accident then, that the district has attracted so many residents involved with the arts, and has also served as subject matter for them.

In this exhibition, Susanna Steig’s rooftop cityscape scene mirrors and sums up the urban and visual amenities of the area. The Statue of Liberty symbolizes the harbor; the high subway trestle is a link to Manhattan and itself provides commanding views of Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the harbor. Church steeples and the sharp focus details of architectural embellishments further summarize the Slope. Many other paintings in the show give more detailed, street level views of smaller vistas. Park Slope works almost any way you look at it.

#### SOURCES

1. PARK SLOPE HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION REPORT, 1973.
2. Jane Jacobs, DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES, Vintage Books, New York, 1961.

## PARK SLOPE: THE URBAN SUBJECT

Park Slope has neither the urban bustle of John Sloane's Greenwich Village nor the transient population of 14th Street, but it accommodates a numerous group of artists, some of whom take the area as subject matter. The "Interiors/Exteriors" of the title is appropriate to the neighborhood in several ways. The exteriors of the late 19th and early 20th century houses carry a cargo of decorative ornament, so that the facades are domesticated, and the interiors are often architecturally-defined, not merely neutral indoor space. Bob Bidner's paintings of representative houses of the area are symmetrical: the image on one side is exactly reversed on the other, but both halves are illuminated by a single light source. Thus the mirror image is made illusive, but confers an odd tidiness on the paired facades, as if the houses were really interiors. In June Blum's portrait of Cindy Nemser, editor of the *Feminist Art Journal*, the house across the street, framed by the window, seems to become part of the order of the living room. Laura Shechter, though also a still life painter, depicts the complexities of interior space, as it is divided and stratified by architectural form. Architectural exchanges like these are natural among the handsome houses of Park Slope, such as those Shunji Sakuyama celebrates in terms of bright pattern.

A number of the artists can be viewed in relation to the tradition of townscape. The city as shelter, as the form of recurrent human activity, has been a topic of artists since the 17th century when Jan van der Heyden and Gerrit Berckheydon<sup>1</sup> observed the shape of the manmade environment in the same terms of light and space as the unbuilt-on land between cities. The Dutch artists' study of their living space was continued in the 18th century, especially in Venice where the focus shifted from the urban fabric as a whole to celebrated buildings and sites. Antonio Canaletto's paintings function as souvenir as well as survey. The topographical response to the world reached an unexpected peak in early Impressionism: the landscapes of Paris and its suburbs and villages done in the 1860s by Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and Alfred Sisley. Their paintings can be called consensual realism, in that they show images of the world that seem to match daily experience. The Park Slope artists work within a canon of verifiable likeness, which of course is no constraint on personal emphasis and interpretation.

Three panoramas in the exhibition locate Park Slope. One is Arthur Levine's pencil drawing which shows the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch in Grand Army Plaza in the foreground and high rise buildings in Flatbush in the distance. Ellen McCall's watercolor inventively contrasts a jumble of dark roofs with the distant flash of light on the Narrows between Brooklyn and Staten Island. Susanna Steig's "Morning Light" is a city-top landscape of roofs, chimneys, cornices, and windows, as well as red letters that spell "kentile" backwards and far off the Statue of Liberty, a cool green among the prevailing pinks, browns, and buffs. In the foreground the hulking gable of St. John's Church stabilizes the painting with a weight that makes up for the absence of the ground plane (it is below the line of sight). Park Slope of course is characterized by Prospect Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmstead, and several artists in the present show have worked there. Eddie Earl Cato has constructed a Spring meadow with a stream, removing any sign of surrounding architecture; Harvey Dinnerstein has used the romantic structures of the park in relation to figures; and Lennart Anderson contemplates a simple, blocky, anonymous shed.

It should not be thought that the discussion of urban topography in any way devalues a work of art. Rackstraw Downes has made the point that there is "no distinction between landscape and townscape"<sup>2</sup> and I view the works named above on that basis. The fact is that with the renewal of realism, the different genres are in use again as a way of thinking about art. Landscape and cityscape, portraiture and figure painting, still life and interiors, represent different kinds of space, different transformations of scale, and different traditions of subject matter. The genres were originally used to rank art hierarchically, with figure painting at the top and still life at the bottom, which obviously no one would do now, but their descriptive use is a helpful way of grouping things of the same kind together. For example, the distinction that has emerged recently between still life and interiors is appropriate to several artists here<sup>3</sup>. Both genres deal with objects, but they are not the same in their effect and meaning. Still life tends to be organized in spatial islands, table tops or shelves bearing objects, whereas interiors admit a larger segment of space, with implications of territoriality and

personal use. There is a strong group of still life paintings in the show, including the radiant clutter of Marion Lerner Levine, the commanding dolls of Ronnie Carson, Harriet Holden-Nash's witty expansion of flat wall *trompe l'oeil*, and Susan Newmark's "Little Things", an evocation of a store window. Don Stern connects his foreground objects with distant forms and light through windows, but despite the horizontal expansion he holds to the characteristic foreground ledge of still life. On the other hand Pat Mainardi's paintings, in which the corner of a room swings around a rocking chair, are interiors as they imply body-space.

The human figure as subject appears in a variety of forms. In Cynthia Dantzig's drawings of foreshortened nudes, we see work that grows from the life classes that artists share in their studios. This is a steady practice of artists and a constant resource of figurative art. Audrey Frank's sensibility to the relation of figures and surrounding space is well seen in "Susan's Yard", a study of the threshold between house and garden. Both Josephine Burns and Jerome Burns paint interiors as lived-in spaces, with a Post-Impressionist diffusion of color that loosens architectural sequences into sliding planes. George Hildrew paints large, demonstrative figures whose precise actions are veiled or blocked: his purposeful denial of clarity gives us a sense of being the sudden witnesses of enigmatic events. Something of this tension can be found also in Elias Rivera whose scenes of bohemian life are rendered in a tenebrist style, so that leisure imagery and psychological lighting collide. Ben-Zion Shechter's delicate drawings have their roots in fantasy, like a reverie on both one's self and old master drawing.

The emphasis on this exhibition is on representational art, but this is a broad category. It includes the personally invented, overlaid forms of Gail Edelman, the abstracted imagery of Diane Miller, and the symbolist undertones of Simon Dinnerstein's "Gregory's Party", in which dolls in a row confront the spectator like people. The exhibition is an urban show not only to the extent that the artists in it can be associated with the forms and event of daily life in Park Slope, but in another sense. The show is a sample of the broad-based creative energy that flourishes despite predictions of alienation and cultural decline. In the hands of curators Laura Shechter and Susan Newmark Fleming, this non-dogmatic selection of work in progress shows the artistic potential in the urban and suburban network of American life.

—Lawrence Alloway

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### SOURCES

1. Christopher Brown. *DUTCH TOWNSCAPE PAINTERS*. London: National Gallery, 1972.

2. *LANDSCAPE VIEWS*. Edited by Lawrence Alloway. Montclair State College, New Jersey, 1978. p.5

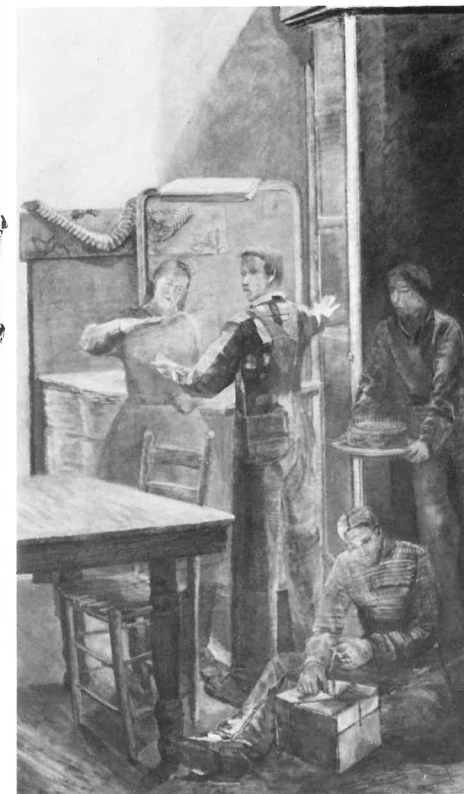
3. "Interior vs. Still Life Space". Panelists: Laura Shechter, Susanna Steig, Ora Lerman, Andy Marcus, Larry Pagin. New York: Educational Alliance, 1976.

Robert Bidner, *561 First Street*, 1976  
Acrylic, 48'' x 64''. collection of Mr & Mrs Weill



Diane Miller, *Garfield Place Light*, 1977  
charcoal, 23¼'' x 17¼''. collection of Susan Gabel

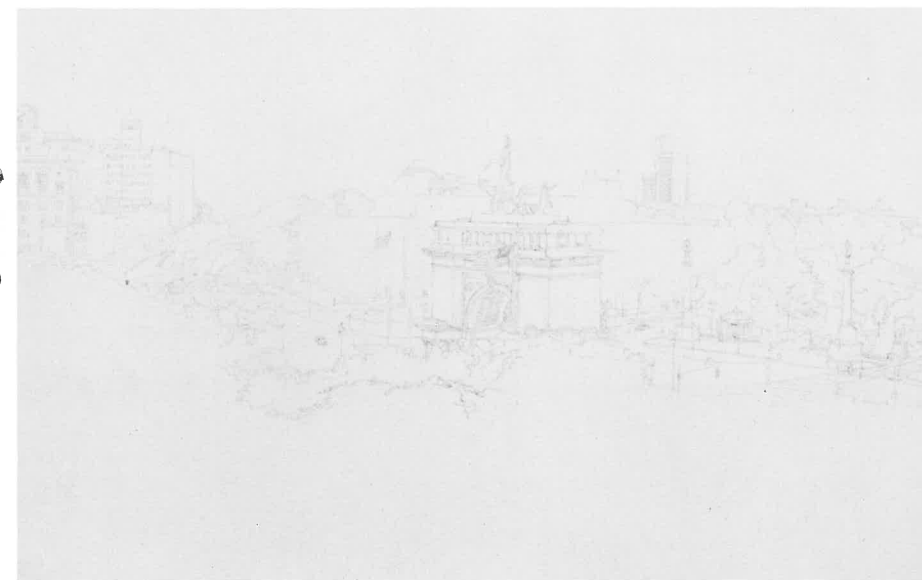
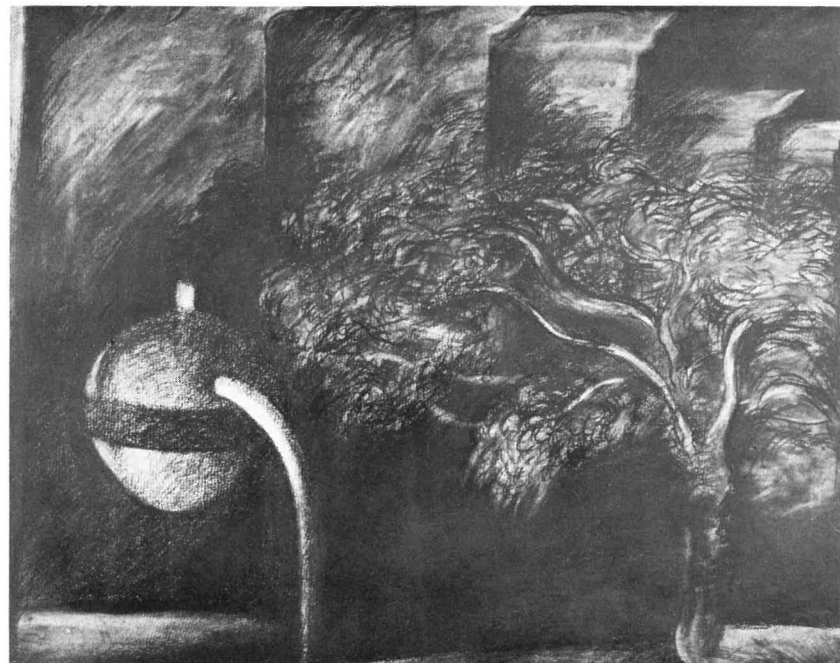
Josephine Burns, *Interior with Figure*, 1979  
oil on canvas, 26'' x 32''.

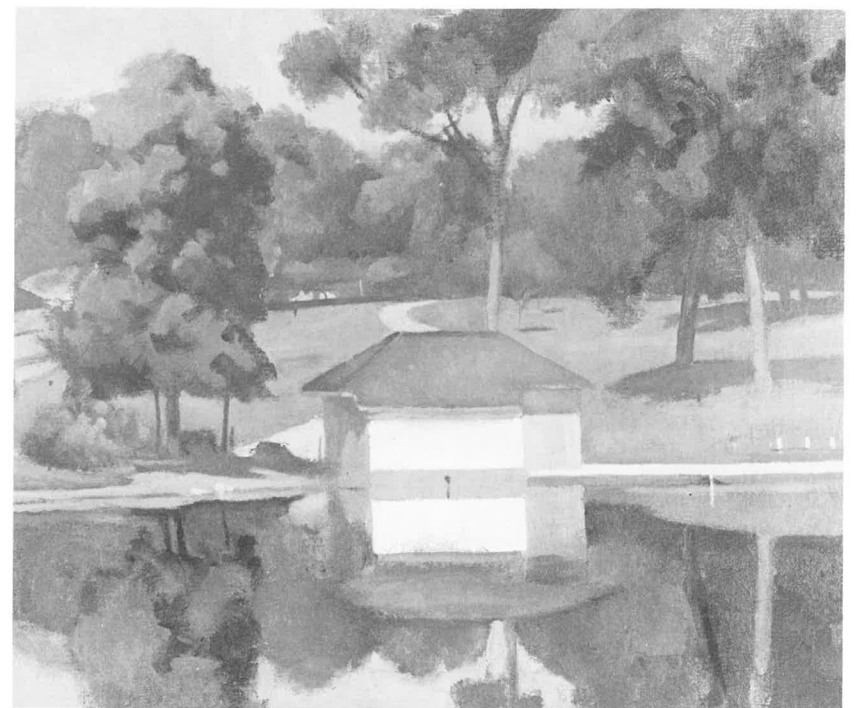


Laura Shechter, *Livingroom Interior*, 1979  
watercolor, 12½'' x 8 5/8''. courtesy Forum Gallery

George Hildrew, *Birthday Party*, 1979  
oil on canvas, 48'' x 84''

Arthur Levine, *Grand Army Plaza*, 1979  
pencil. courtesy Prince Street Gallery





Susanna Stieg, *Morning Light*, 1979, oil on panel, 15½" x 28", courtesy Prince Street Gallery

Pat Mainardi, *Interior*, 1976, 1976, watercolor and gouache, 22½" x 26", courtesy Ingber Gallery

Harriet Holden-Nash, *Wall Piece II*, 1979, pencil, 20" x 28"

Simon Dinnerstein, *Gregory's Party*, 1979, oil on wood panel, 42" x 64", private collection



Lennart Anderson, *Prospect Park*, 1979  
oil on canvas, 14" x 17", courtesy Davis & Long Company

Ronnie Carson, *Doll in Pink with Flowered Wall Paper*, 1980  
oil on canvas, 16" x 20", courtesy First Street Gallery

Elias Rivera, *Machine Coffee House*, 1979  
oil on canvas, 16" x 20"



Eddie Earl Cato, *Prospect Park*, 1980  
oil on canvas, 30" x 16", courtesy Tatistcheff and Co. Inc.

Shunji Sakuyama, *Brooklyn*, 1979  
colored lithograph, 19" x 26"

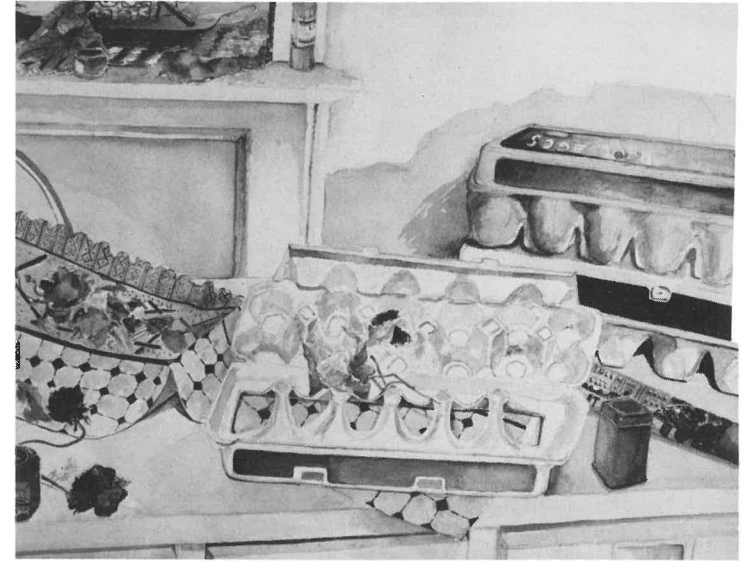
Ben-Zion Shechter, *Summer Wind*, 1979  
Silverpoint, 6¼" x 4½"



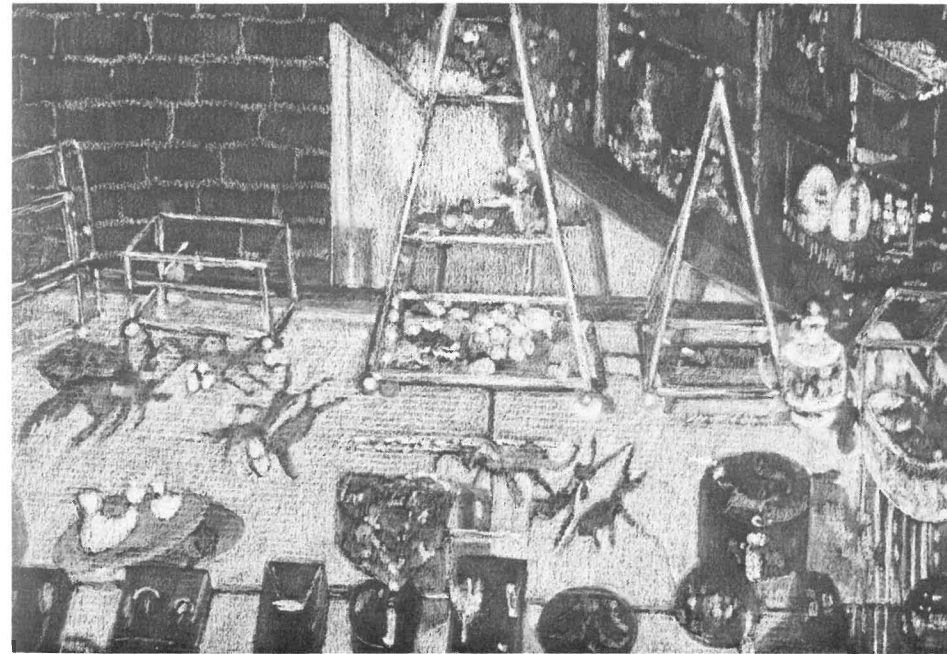
Marion Lerner Levine, *Still Life Near White Mantel*, 1978  
watercolor, 18" x 24", courtesy Prince Street Gallery

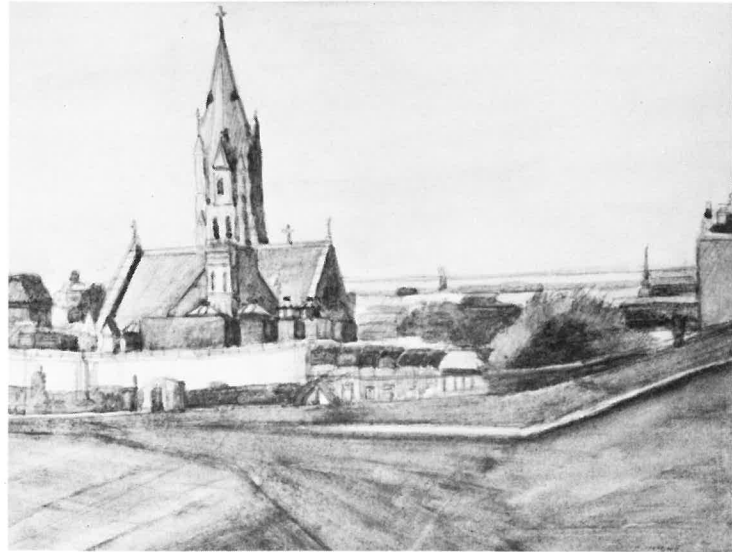


Harvey Dinnerstein, *Working in the Park*, 1978  
oil on canvas, 44" x 44", courtesy FAR Gallery



Susan Newmark, *Little Things from Seventh Ave.*, 1979  
colored pencil, 6½" x 10"

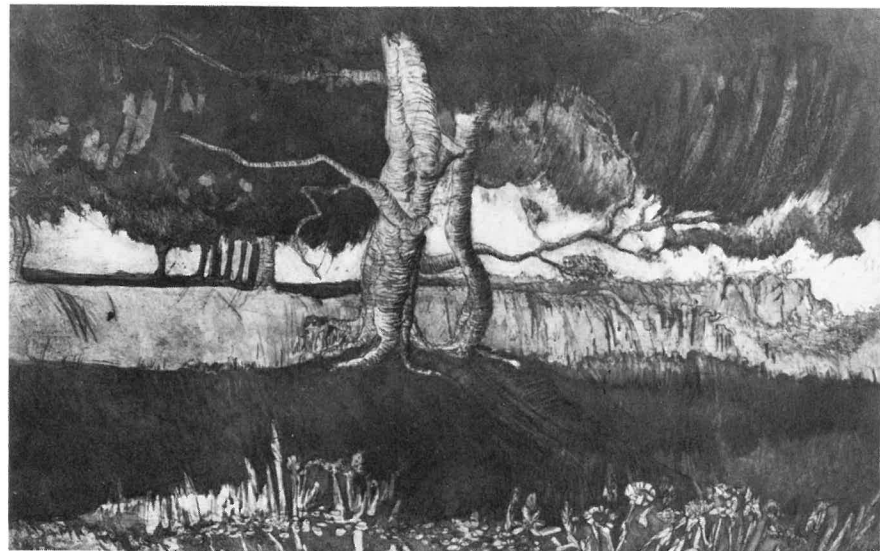




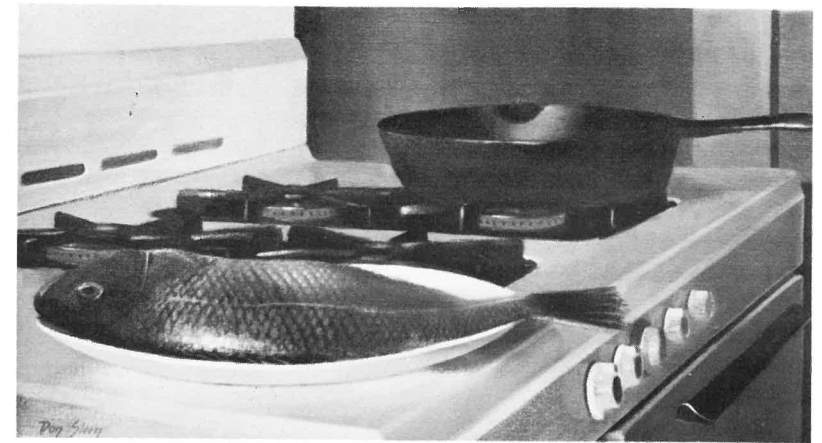
Ellen McCall, *Church Steeple, Park Slope*, 1980  
watercolor, 15" x 11"



Jerome Burns, *Parlor Floor*, 1979  
acrylic on canvas, 26" x 32"



Gail Edelman, *Treasures from the Deep*, 1979  
colored etching-engraving, 12" x 17", courtesy Pleiades Gallery



Don Stern, *Sea Bass*, 1979  
oil, 24" x 31"

June Blum, *Cindy Nemser*, 1975  
oil on canvas, 48" x 50"

Cynthia Dant zic, *Nude in Antique Recliner*, 1979  
pencil, 19" x 25"

Audrey Frank, *Susan's Yard*, 1980  
oil on canvas, 5' x 7'



**LENNART ANDERSON**

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