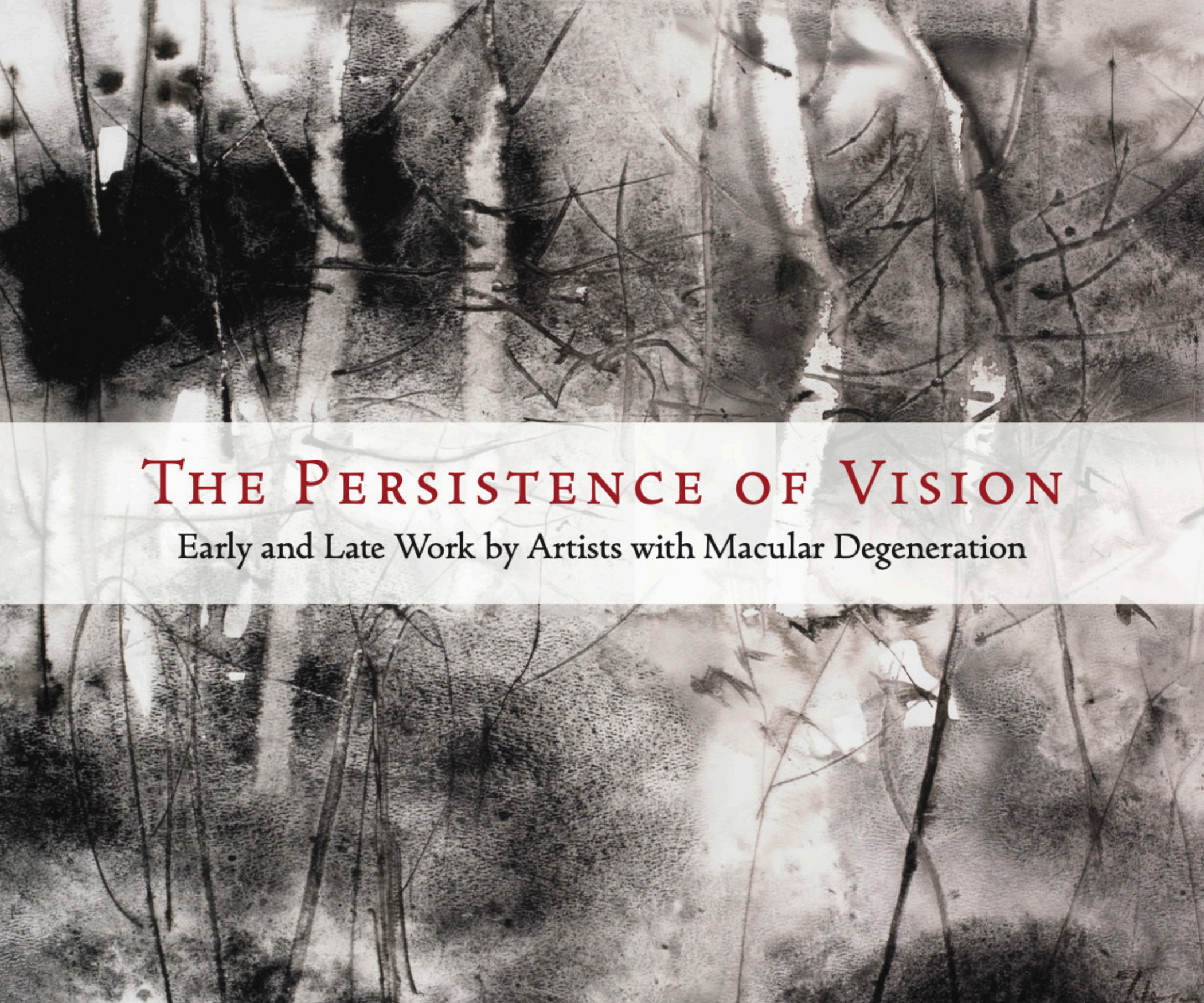


The Persistence of Vision

Early and Late Work by Artists with Macular Degeneration

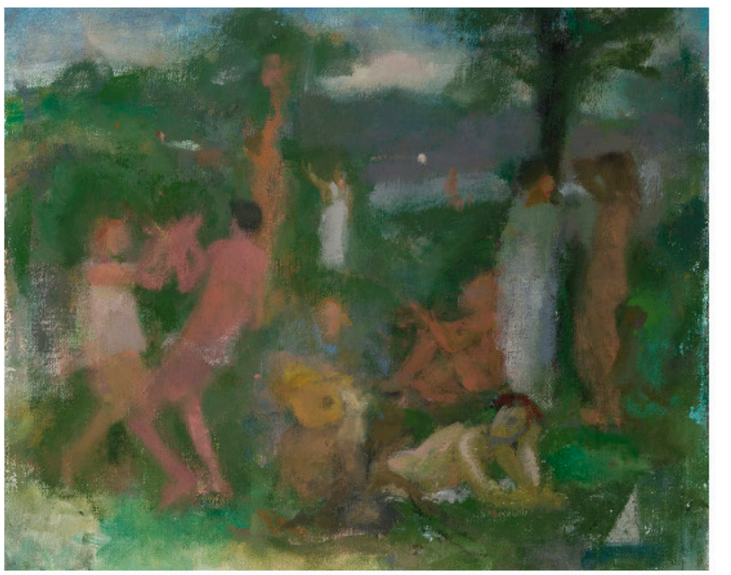
Lennart Anderson

We first met Lennart Anderson when we visited his studio in 2012. Anderson was 84 at the time and had been legally blind for about 10 years. He couldn't see us very well, only our general shapes. He worked in a room with a skylight on the top floor of his Brooklyn brownstone. It was cluttered with stacks of heavily used art books, mismatched metal and wooden chairs, easels, potted plants, coffee cans full of bristle brushes. Small charcoal sketches that he was using as reference for his paintings were pinned to the open spaces of the plastered walls. Oil paintings hung in frames, some of them his own work and some given to him by his many students, friends, and colleagues.

In the corner of Anderson's studio, one piece of furniture was particularly well-used: a fraying armchair, set within reach of an assembly of old stereo components and a stack of cracked CD and tape cases. Anderson often sat here during the course of his day's work, or in the evening when there was no longer enough light to paint by. A wooden elementary school chair served as coffee table, upon which perched a stack of art books several feet high. Each book was stuffed with paper scraps marking Anderson's favorite images. The magnifying glass he used both when he studied paintings and when he worked lay on top of the pile.

At the time of our visit Anderson had recently abandoned a portrait he was painting from life and was putting the finishing touches on *Idyll 3*, the penultimate of a series of multi-figured bacchanals he had begun decades earlier.

Lennart Anderson, *Hammock*, 1999, Pre-macular, Oil on canvas mounted on board, 16 5/8 x 20 3/4 inches
Collection of AMDF



Lennart Anderson, *Idyll 4*, c. 2012, Post-macular, Oil on canvas mounted on board, 16 x 19 inches
Collection of AMDF

LENNART ANDERSON, *Idyll 3*, 1979–2011, Pre- and post-macular, Acrylic on linen, 77 x 96 inches

Estate of Lennart Anderson, Courtesy of Leigh Morse Fine Arts

As we talked, he often squinted and craned his neck, scratching at the surface of his painting. He said he had always found painting "mysterious" and "difficult," now more so than ever, and he talked matter-of-factly about how macular degeneration vastly increased the difficulty of painting: he couldn't see the colors on his palette, assess his work in a single glance, or place his brush where he wanted. Most vexing to him was his recent lack of confidence. He still had images in his mind that he wanted to paint, and he could no longer be sure that what he saw in his mind's eye was what appeared on the canvas.

In the next three years, Anderson finished *Idyll 3* and several other marvelous paintings as well. Some were done partially from life but most were based on drawings he had completed years earlier, and took enormous effort to produce. "Why do I paint?" he mused, and then answered himself, "You have to connect things. You have to simplify, you have to expand. And that's wonderful to do."

Serge Hollerbach

In his small studio apartment on the Upper West Side, the 95-year old Russian-born artist Serge Hollerbach lives his life much as he has for decades. Mornings are spent taking care of his ailing wife, shopping, and cooking. Afternoons he settles into his studio to paint.

In early 2014, on our first visit to Hollerbach's studio to interview him about his life and career, we watched him feel around among his art supplies, navigating more by touch than vision, find the brushes he was looking for propped in a Mason jar, rattle the handles against the glass with a sure hand, and snap out a few clean, white rags. He was preparing to start a new painting, a surprisingly large blank white cotton duck canvas, vertical, looming in front of him on his easel. The dense streetscape of New York City as viewed from twelve stories up bustled silently behind the double-hung window he had been looking out for over fifty years. After a few minutes of squeezing red, black, and yellow paint onto his glass palette, he confidently dipped into the black with a bristle brush, then struck directly on the canvas, carving out a semblance of street figures in bold strokes of unmixed acrylic paint. Three city dwellers emerged on the canvas, New Yorkers on their daily errands, apparent strangers carrying shopping bags, walking dogs, rolling luggage, frozen in time with their long shadows cast toward the viewer. Hollerbach shored up his failing vision with a medley of memory, touch, and a lifetime of painterly sensibilities.

It wouldn't be accurate to say that Serge's paintings have continued to get better since his vision loss,