



ROBERT BIRMELIN



ROBERT BIRMELIN

Recent Paintings
Maine and New York

BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

BRUNSWICK MAINE

1980

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Birmelin's works were first brought to my attention by members of the Bowdoin College studio art faculty Joe Nicoletti and Gerard Haggerty, both of whom felt that his art contributed vital and original elements to contemporary painting. During the spring of 1979, Birmelin addressed an overflow audience at the College's Visual Arts Center, and I had the opportunity to examine slides of his drawings and paintings and to discuss his works with him. Later in the year, I visited his New York studio to view his large canvases.

The variety of Birmelin's talent was evident immediately in skyline views of New York, boulder scapes of the Maine coast at Deer Isle and in two series *PEOPLE ON THE BEACH* and *CITY CROWDS*. The figured beach and crowd scenes were the most difficult for me to look at because of the abrasive intensity of their composition. A friction results from the placement of partially seen figures and the haunting qualities of space in which long vistas are juxtaposed with gigantic foreground details; the whole shifts in and out of focus and is acerbated by the sharpness of an acrylic palette. But within these works, especially the city scenes, Birmelin captures subjects we

frequently see but rarely acknowledge, never verbalize. However disturbing, the paintings were as powerful as any work I had recently seen. I became convinced that particularly those works most difficult to confront had to be shown and proper recognition accorded to one of the most innovative of contemporary artists.

It has been a privilege to work with Robert Birmelin on this project; he has given generously of his own time and patiently helped with innumerable details. Gerard Haggerty, whose enthusiasm in part stimulated the project, has written a perceptive essay on the artist; we are grateful for his collaboration.

As with every exhibition at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, the members of the staff deserve special recognition: Lynn Yanok particularly for her assistance with the catalogue, and Kerry O'Brien and Peter Simmons who worked closely with the artist on the practical organization and installation design of the exhibition. I wish also to thank John McKee, Lecturer in Art, Bowdoin College, for his assistance with the catalogue design, and John Green for his volunteer services as lighting consultant.

—Katharine J. Watson
Director

A NOTE ON THE PAINTINGS

The work in this exhibition represents my continuing effort to respond to the special characteristics of the two very different environments in which I have lived and worked. Every year for the past twelve years I have left my studio in New York City for a two-month stay on Deer Isle in Penobscot Bay. The quarter mile of shoreline along Eggemoggin Reach and the city streets on which I walk—I paint them both because painting is for me a process through which I can reflect upon and better understand the quality and peculiar drama of each experience.

On the rocky beach I observe the continuous slow changing contour of shoreline as it captures then releases a whole population of boulders. The variety of kinds of rock on this particular beach interests me like the variety of kinds of people moving past me in the crowd. I am even more fascinated by the way the random positionings of the boulders seem to suggest social groupings through their placement, proximity to one another and in their hierarchy of sizes. There are clusters that form metaphorical families, friends and enemies, leaders and led. The rocks are not static. As minute by minute the tide reshapes the shore, I have the illusion of a society in fretful, repetitive motion, meandering away from and then back to the sea, being submerged and then emerging once more.

That I sought and found a social order among the rocks on the beach was no accident; I had been observing and painting crowds on city

streets for some years. These were human crowds, of course, and their movement was not illusory. Rather than a background of silence on the beach there was the ceaseless noise of the city: cars, trucks and the tread of feet; rather than quiet contemplation there was the need for quick maneuvering.

In the midst of the city crowd one is not solely an observer but a participant—in motion, watchful and wary. Eye contact can be an electric event; an incident provokes a configuration of people on which I focus for an instant before it alters then dissolves sending the other participants off, dispersed along their own random seeming paths.

For me painting is a way of thinking. Visual images contain ideas which can be expressed in no other way. I am less concerned with transcribing an impression of a place or event as I am in recreating the intensity of my experience within it. This is what accounts for the structural and metaphorical correspondences between the CITY paintings and the MAINE paintings. Indeed the boulders in place on Deer Isle helped me to see the city streets and the movement of the crowds taught me about the shoreline.

I wish to express my appreciation to Katharine Watson for her warm support and intelligent guidance, to Gerry Haggerty for his thoughtful essay, and finally to Joe Nicoletti who helped it all get started in the first place.

— Robert Birmelin

THE EYE ON THE PROWL

Global peril is the ever-present, ignored specter of the atomic age, and vicarious terror is grist for the mill of popular fiction. Thus menace in the abstract can be dismissed, or even entertain. Personal threats however are urgently compelling. When faced with danger, the pulse accelerates and time seems to slow. Although the experience is bitter, it is also a tonic which rouses the blood and sharpens the senses. Robert Birmelin's paintings show us that such exceptional circumstances warrant unusual kinds of perception.

In *CITY CROWD—YELLOW SHIRT* [cat. 14; illustrated on cover], the early warning system is alert for incipient trouble. Walking within these concrete, man-made canyons, our attention stays taut. The only route open to us is one which we might prefer to avoid. As our focus sweeps to and fro like antennae scanning for danger, input tends to be vivid and fragmented. The eye is caught by the distant police, and we scrutinize carefully a boisterous group of youths on the steps of a faraway brownstone. Other details reveal themselves with time. We start sorting out afterimages and shadows from palpable figures. Slowly, an elaborate network of crossing communications unfolds: signs, handbills, glances, and shouted conversations.

This is simultaneously New York's Broadway and 125th Street, and also the domain where imagination scurries freely. Birmelin records for us that which is too quick for contemplation or too near for clarity. These are realms where opti-

cal distortions are the norm and hallucinations flourish: the quotidian habitat of fancies and day-lit nightmares.

The artist favors the sidelong glance and the unlikely interval, capturing those junctures in the everyday world which invite a double take. Observe for instance the orange-skirted figure in *CITY CROWD—YELLOW SHIRT*. She is decidedly frozen in mid-stride. So that we might better see her motion, her feet have vanished. *THE REMOTE AIRPORT* [cat. 15, illustrated] likewise demonstrates the persistence of vision in apprehending rapid arrivals and departures. As they rush off to their separate worlds, travelers merge and blur in transit.

Our viewpoint in these urban landscapes usually locates us in the lower-left. Thus situated, our alter ego is firmly stuck in the midst of life and surrounded by the teeming throng. Everywhere we encounter the ironic public privacy of the city. With legions of people as backdrop, individual idiosyncracies are camouflaged. The parade of mankind overwhelms discrete particulars. Expressions, personal mannerisms, and individual hallmarks tend to go unheeded in the general flow of life.

The etiquette related to glances, gestures, and body contact is all situational. Though individual members of Birmelin's multitude appear ominous, the crowd as such is predictable on city streets. Close quarters go with the turf, and touch between strangers can be casual or un-

noticed. Similar intimacies in a rural setting are quite another matter.

PEOPLE ON THE BEACH—TOUCHING [cat. 1, illustrated] brings the feeling of impending strife several degrees closer to flash point. A man's leviathan profile in the immediate foreground leans forward as his hand reaches out to contact the shoulder of another. Behind them, an expansive coastal backdrop exaggerates the figures' proximity. Nearness in this place of vast distances is unnerving. Everything is too close for comfort, and like it or not, we're a part of this scene. If this were life, we could feel the body heat radiating from the sunburned arm, smell the suntan lotion, and perhaps catch the faint scent of fear as well. In the manner of a thematic apperception test, our own fantasies collaborate with a potentially charged image.

THE SIGHTING OF SOMETHING [cat. 5, illustrated] is yet another unfinished narrative that begs for completion. The principal drama occurs out of sight. In an unseen section of the gunmetal blue sea, we each imagine a special 'something'. Our reveries are invited, but the work's neutral title does not impinge on whatever interpretation we discern. As is often true of dreams, we are obliged to deduce the whole on the basis of a fragment.

Birmelin's diversity of subject matter belies certain common concerns. In both landscapes and city scenes, the illusion of space is convincing and felt viscerally. The same navigational strategies apply to both the rocky beaches of Maine and Manhattan's littered sidewalks. As viewers study the paintings, they are liable to shift about unconsciously while the body moves in sympathetic response to the eye traversing difficult terrain.

The weave of the canvas concerns Birmelin less than the interwoven spatial and social fabrics of our time. Gone is the safe hegemony of the picture plane, that window which has framed and restrained so much twentieth century painting. Vanished too is our chronic spectator status.

These works do not depict events which have been roped off for our comfortable perusal. We're INVOLVED here. On the streets, by way of eye-to-eye contact with his characters, the painter certifies OUR presence. The observer is observed. By implication, I'm seen, therefore I am.

To a remarkable degree, Birmelin's paintings realize the ambitions of the Futurists, who proclaimed in 1912:

...The picture must be a synthesis of what one remembers and of what one sees.

You must render the invisible which stirs and lives beyond intervening obstacles, what we have on the right, on the left, and behind us, and not merely the small square of life, artificially compressed, as it were, by the wings of a stage...

With the desire to intensify the aesthetic emotions by blending, so to speak, the painted canvas with the soul of the spectator, we have declared that the latter 'must in the future be placed in the center of the picture'.

He shall not be present, but participate in the action.

GAZING AT THE WHITE BOULDER [cat. 11, illustrated] represents a novel twist on these ideas. The edges of the canvas correspond to the borders of our own visual field: that vast, little-used and mysterious region of our sight. In this instance, we recognize ourselves, for the painting begins with the side of our nose and cheek, appropriately blurred. A term like 'foreground' is anachronistic and ludicrous here, since it implies something separate from the viewer. The image invites empathy on a grand scale. After a fashion, it is everyman's self-portrait.

It must be our own foot, then, at the base of the frame. With right hand extended as part of a tricky balancing maneuver, we stand gingerly atop a fairly small, uneven stone. This precarious perch is surrounded by multicolored pebbles—the refuse left in the wake of Pleistocene glaciers—but our eye is drawn irresistibly to the

centered white boulder. Stare fixedly at its speckled form, and the peripheral distortions promptly right themselves.

Looming before us, the rock widens as it recedes in space. Our riveted attention and clarity of focus have dreamlike ramifications, or suggest some sort of epiphany. It is as if we've come across an amulet, or rediscovered a lost personal talisman.

BEING GUIDED [cat. 6, illustrated], like GAZING, shows that the ordinary can be a stepping stone into the extraordinary. Once again, we are involved in a quest, seeking out a goal that is perhaps a mirage. Our pathway is strewn with stones—more glacial debris to snag and direct our progress. From the right side of the format, an arm leads the way. Inward. The hand, the clouds, and the stones all point to an aperture that is framed by two enormous boulders. The monoliths arc obliquely into deep space. Like a muted rainbow, these granite surfaces are laced with copper and rust, blooming with seaweed and lichen. But it is the area between masses that attracts our gaze. This azure, gull-shaped opening draws our attention like a magnet. Taken altogether, the moment is mesmerizing.

The artist's introduction to this exhibition indicates that the tendency to anthropomorphize is invited and premeditated. Consider FIRE ON THE BEACH [cat. 8; frontispiece] as a case in point. Like all of Birmelin's work, the scene expands beyond that which is overtly shown. We seek a 'before' in contemplating the vista, and imagine an 'after'. For the sake of a sedate and predictable reality, the untended fire is presumed to be a human artifact. What we observe is thus an enigmatic moment that has been excerpted from an otherwise commonplace chain of events.

Despite such plausible explanations, the aura of the visionary persists. Here, twilight appears as the alchemical illumination of myth or allegory. The sunset evokes the haunting and heady romance of Caspar David Friedrich's nineteenth

century Germany, updated and brought to the beaches of Deer Isle. The panorama is breathtaking and private. It is as if we are witness to the primal beginnings of life, or a pyre to signal its end.

Birmelin has remarked that 'all artists are standing on the shoulders of a giant, and that giant is history'. In this spirit, he acknowledges debts to Friedrich and Munch. The Futurist exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art remains for him a particularly sharp youthful memory. More arcane sources are welcomed too; Birmelin credits the origin of GAZING to a diagram by Ernst Mach, the nineteenth century German physiologist.

Despite such historical echoes, Birmelin is emphatically partisan on behalf of art for life's sake. His subject is the visible world—which is to say, the world as our sensory apparatus allows us to apprehend it. The artist arrests for our contemplation all of that challenging visual input which is routinely rejected; data which suggests surreal alternatives to expected norms. Birmelin's content is not what we KNOW, but rather that which is perceived. Rendered as a subtle game of tangents and transparencies, these hallucinatory afterimages are simultaneously familiar and disorienting. Here, what we see is what we get, and the shock of recognition is profound.

This is realism as the human eye understands the term: sight, observed with the hindsight of contemporary perceptual psychology. Long ago, Goethe wrote that although humans and animals are educated via their senses, mankind alone possesses the ability to educate the senses in return. Birmelin's paintings are valuable lessons in this never-ending enterprise.

—Gerard Haggerty

Brunswick, January 1980

The author is grateful to the National Endowment for the Arts, and Bowdoin College, for their support in the preparation of this text.

ROBERT BIRMELIN



















CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

- Indicates work illustrated in this catalogue.
 - 1 People on the Beach—Touching
Acrylic on canvas, 47" × 71"
1978
 - 2 People on the Beach—Black Dog
Acrylic on canvas, 47" × 71"
1978
 - 3 People on the Beach—An Event to the Right
Acrylic on canvas, 48" × 72"
1977-79
 - 4 People on the Beach—In the Midst
of Life, The Interrupted Beach Party
Acrylic on canvas, 48" × 71"
1976-77
 - 5 The Sighting of Something in the Sea
Acrylic on canvas, 72" × 48"
1978
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- 6 **Being Guided**
Acrylic on canvas, 48" × 72"
1977
 - 7 **Glacial Boulders, Blue Hill Bay**
Acrylic on canvas, 48" × 96"
1976
 - 8 **Fire on the Beach [frontispiece]**
Acrylic on canvas, 47½" × 47½"
1978
 - 9 **Boulders at My Feet**
Acrylic on canvas, 70" × 47"
1978
 - 10 **Deer Isle Study**
Oil on panel, 16" × 27"
1976
 - 11 **Gazing at the White Boulder**
Acrylic on canvas, 48" × 48"
1976
 - 12 **City Crowd—Tongue and Black Kerchief**
Acrylic on canvas, 48" × 96"
1976-78
 - 13 **Moving up the Street**
Acrylic on canvas, 78" × 72"
1976-80
 - 14 **City Crowd—Yellow Shirt (2nd version) [cover]**
Acrylic on canvas, 48" × 72"
1979-80
 - 15 **The Remote Airport**
Acrylic on canvas, 47" × 71"
1977-78
 - 16 **City Crowd—Cop and Ear (2nd version)**
Acrylic on canvas, 48" × 96"
1980
 - 17 **City Crowd—Chin and Hat**
Acrylic on canvas, 60" × 78"
1977-80
 - 18 **City Crowd—Chambers Street**
Acrylic on canvas, 47" × 72"
1977-79
 - 19 **The Street—Chin and Black Windows**
Acrylic on canvas, 36" × 36"
1977-79
 - 20 **City Study—The Hat**
Oil on panel, 20" × 24"
1976
 - 21 **City Study—A Municipal Office**
Oil on panel, 20" × 24"
1976
-

ROBERT BIRMELIN

Born 1933 in Newark, New Jersey;
lives in Leonia, New Jersey, and
works in New York City.

SELECTED ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 1960 Kanegis Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts
Stable Gallery, New York City
- 1962 Usis Gallery, Milan, Italy
Esther Bear Gallery, Santa Barbara, California
- 1964 Kanegis Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts
Stable Gallery, New York City
- 1965 Jason-Teff Gallery, Montreal, Canada
- 1966 Kanegis Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts
- 1967 Stable Gallery, New York City
- 1968 Alpha Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts
Capricorn Gallery, Bethesda, Maryland
- 1970 Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York City
- 1971 Alpha Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts
- 1972 Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York City
- 1973 Alpha Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts
- 1975 Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York City
- 1978 Peter Rose Gallery, New York City
- 1979 Capricorn Gallery, Bethesda, Maryland
- 1980 Odysia Gallery, New York City (upcoming)
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WORKS IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

The Brooklyn Museum
Brooklyn, New York

The Chase Manhattan Bank
New York City

The Denver Art Museum
Denver, Colorado

Florida State University Art Gallery
Tallahassee, Florida

Indiana University Art Museum
Bloomington, Indiana

Kalamazoo Art Center
Kalamazoo, Michigan

The Museum of Contemporary Art
Nagaoka, Japan

The Museum of Modern Art
New York City

The Newark Museum
Newark, New Jersey

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
San Francisco, California

The Sara Roby Foundation
New York City

Sheldon Swope Art Gallery
Terre Haute, Indiana

University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts

State University of New York
Cortland, New York

University of Nebraska Art Galleries
Lincoln, Nebraska

University of North Carolina
Greensboro, North Carolina

University of Texas Art Museum
Austin, Texas

Williams College Museum of Art
Williamstown, Massachusetts

University of Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin

Worcester Art Museum
Worcester, Massachusetts

GRANTS AND AWARDS RECEIVED

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1960

U. S. Government (Fulbright Program), 1960-61

American Academy in Rome, 1961-64

National Institute of Arts and Letters, 1968-1971, 1976

Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, 1973

National Endowment for the Arts, 1976



