

Martha Mayer Erlebacher was born in 1937 in Jersey City, New Jersey. She attended Pratt Institute from 1956 to 1963, obtaining a Bachelor's degree in Industrial Design and a Master of Fine Arts Education degree in painting.

She was trained as an abstract expressionist and had to make her own journey back to the figure. Early on, the artist felt certain discrepancies: "When I was growing up there were certain artists that I liked and at a certain point I was told that that was old hat and that they had no relevance whatsoever. But I kept saying to myself that I like them. I like Giotto, give me Fra Angelico, Piero de Francesca. That painting speaks to me."

However, she showed abstract-expressionist work at the Brooklyn Museum in 1959. Realizing "Abstract Expressionism was not her temperament, she nonetheless felt the pressure of the times to stay within it.

She gradually started putting the figure in her work and stopped avoiding painting the figure directly. The figure fell into place for her when she and her husband (sculptor, Walter Erlebacher) undertook the study of Anatomy. "We bought books and a skeleton and we felt each other constantly." These studies began approximately in 1967.

A look at Erlebacher's work is a view of the former abstract artist learning the figure as she's gone along making her current acknowledged excellence in rendition of the figure in both drawing and painting all the more remarkable.

Her early figure paintings seem almost imitative of early Italian Renaissance paintings. Later works no longer have the look of that time but you recognize a kinship.

Some elements that associate her with the early Italian Renaissance artists are the blonde tones with closely related skin and hair values. Other elements to look for in her paintings are the figures and the poses.

- A. centrally enthroned female
- B. of lightedhearted females with billowing drapery
- C. heroic male nude in an easy classic stance.
- D. backgrounds, tiled floors, and gates
- E. distant landscapes and large skies
- F. figures reclining

She always mentally composes her painting. Then working with live models - she poses them according to her mental layout.

Her themes are back to nature, time, love, joys, sin. Her figures physically express their feelings by their poses (turning, twisted, though stable tilted, ~~free~~eing - off-balance, diagonal stance) facial expressions and settings.

Attitude - Constantly renewing bold attitude of free and critical inquiry into the nature of things is sufficient, and is the only genuine guide a painter needs.

She is an artist who dares to go wherever it is that her ideas and feelings about art and life lead.

Currently lives in Elkin Park, Pennsylvania and will be in Boise in May.

Slides

1983 Mars and Venus - oil on canvas - central female, drapery, stance of male, backgrounds, tiled floor, color tones , express reclining

1984 - "Scenes From a Picnic II: Sloth" oil on canvas, central female figure, reclining on drapery, yellow tones, background, tell about how she mentally composes her picture then uses live models and poses them according

1986 "Danse Macabre" her concern of our possible destruction, 4 ways the world as we know it can end - Pollution, Disease and Famine, overpopulation, and Nuclear War. Cloudy moon lit night miles from the busy highway, lights in the distance, dance for death and nature- the attractive young woman, dressed in robe open grave at her feet, skeleton is death

Elements I Air - Childhood

Elements II Fire - Youth

Youth and passion - love story- summer landscape, trio of figures, lovers, embracing-active passion, sleeping female-aftermath of spent passion , diagonally left to right, yellow traditional color for fire, drapery - whirlwind od love-making

1982 Woman in Chair I graphite on paper , plate 84 in ~~American~~ Americam Realism book. Central female figure, drapping with the pillow , posed

Stilllifes

Venus Stilllife , central figure, drapery

Still life paintings are showcases for the delight she takes in redering material cualities and in revealing what she calls ""the mastery of asbtract relationships in the placement of objects.

Her still life paintings show techincal control and depth of understandingthat permits he to recreats it anew "with each painting.

1986 The Three Quinces oil, drapery, placement, tone

1979 Still Life Supreme , watercolor on paper
plate 175 in realism book, placement , color, diagonal lines

FIGURE: THE PAINTINGS OF MARTHA MAYER ERLEBACHER

ELLEN LUBELL

The several anachronisms evident in Martha Mayer Erlebacher's paintings—religious subjects, allegory, and the emulation of Renaissance art—pose not merely a fresh consideration of the past, but an inexorable affirmation of figure painting.

Arts Magazine

Oct 1978



Martha Mayer Erlebacher, Sun Gazer, 1976. Oil on canvas, 64 x 52". Courtesy Robert Schoelkopf Gallery.

Scenes from the Bible are no longer frequent subjects for painters, nor is allegory a popular mode. Yet there are a few figurative artists, lonely outposts in a post-Minimalist jungle, who employ these forms and attempt to imbue them with the many leveled content that was standard a long time ago. In his latest show in New York, Jack Beal displayed paintings of this nature, but more recently another artist more or less identified with this form and content reminded us of just how unusual it is to look (and look) at these seemingly anachronistic paintings—Martha Mayer Erlebacher.

Though 1979 will mark the 20th year of her career as an exhibiting painter, little has been written and still less is known about this enigmatic figurative painter who appears to eschew contemporary aesthetic concerns for those of 15th-century Florence. The sparse critical attention she has received thus far has never failed to mention the Renaissance references in her work, yet, maddeningly, has always stopped short of an explanation for them.

Seeking this explanation, I interviewed Martha Mayer Erlebacher at her Pennsylvania studio this summer. I was as curious about the kind of person she might be as I was about her motivations for recalling Botticelli and Piero della Francesca in her work. Erlebacher's fascinating figurative paintings, shown in New York in three one-artist shows at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery since 1973, have generally been of nudes in sparse landscapes with aspirations to the Classical in pose and draftsmanship, to the monumental in scale, and to the loftier realms of the intellect and spirit in meaning. Her early figure paintings, seen in her 1973 show at Schoelkopf, seem almost imitative of early Italian Renaissance paintings, while the works seen last May no longer had the look of that era but maintained an intangible though recognizable kinship.

How did Erlebacher come to it, and how much of it is a conscious re-doing? Ironically, she was trained as an Abstract Expressionist and had to make her own journey back to the

figure. Born in 1937 in Jersey City, New Jersey, she attended Pratt Institute from 1956 to 1963, obtaining a Bachelor's degree in Industrial Design and a Master of Fine Arts Education degree in painting. Early on, the artist felt certain discrepancies: "When I was growing up, there were certain artists that I liked, and certain point I was told that that was all old hat and that I had no relevance whatsoever. But I kept saying to myself that like them, I like Giotto, give me Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca. That painting speaks to me."

However, she showed Abstract-Expressionist work at Brooklyn Museum in 1959. Realizing "Abstract Expressionism was not [my] temperament," she nonetheless felt the press of the era to stay within that genre. Interested in gestalt psychology and picture structures, she began to do "optic pictures dealing with perceptual phenomena, with pictorial organization on an abstract level. She would use a field of dots to 'localize the picture plane' and portray still lifes, and then did a portrait head 'behind' the dots. After the Op Art show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1965, she ceased working in that mode, as 'it lacked subject. So I gradually started putting the figure in, and then I got rid of the dots because ... I was avoiding the issue of painting the figure directly.'

The figure fell into place for her when she and her husband (sculptor Walter Erlebacher) undertook the study of anatomy. "We bought books and a skeleton ... we felt each other constantly." These studies, begun approximately in 1967, led to 1969 to her painting *Six Figure Composition*, the first after anatomical studies that was done without models. Based on geometric constructions (thigh as cylinder), the figures were bulky and abstractly analytical, reminiscent of Léger; thereafter her figurative conceptions went to musculature rather than geometry. Basically then, a look at Erlebacher's work of the decade is a view of the former abstract artist learning the figure as she's gone along, making her current, acknowledged excellence in rendition of the figure in both drawing and painting all the more remarkable.

The 1973 Schoelkopf show displayed, none too subtly, the elements of her (new) style in an almost raw state, with her sources forcefully, unabashedly revealed. Painting with an oil emulsion, her palette was of blonde tones with closely related skin and hair values that cued the viewer to his/her earlier experiences with Botticelli, Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, and other early Italian Renaissance artists. (Indeed, the technique itself is related to that which her Italian models actually employed and was intended as a conscious reference.)

Other elements, including Erlebacher's subjects, in type of figures and pose, bring reinforcement to the immediate associations brought by the palette. Her depictions of a centrally enthroned female (*Seated Figure*, 1970), of lighthearted females with billowing drapery (*Composition with Two Figures*, 1970), and of a heroic male nude in an easy, classic contrapposto stance (*Apollo*, 1971) are paraphrases of poses and characterizations from the century that served as her inspiration in lieu of a contemporary teacher in the use of the figure. The backgrounds, tiled floors and gates (borrowed most notably from Giovanni Bellini) with distant landscapes and large skies, hark back to the same sources. The artist admits picking this type of background initially for *Composition with Two Figures* after conceiving the figures, selecting this setting as concordant with the ambience created by figures and palette. It is repeated in variation for many of the paintings of this period.

These components, though a declaration of her inspiration, combined with other ingredients to form what has become a discernible Erlebacher style, despite the (now) complete change in the look of her paintings, and served to describe her (still valid) aesthetic concerns. The latter align themselves with those of her Italian forebears: her intense interest in anatomy and in the reportage of the seen (i.e., in the particular, individual characteristics of the model at hand) rather than in the generalization or expressive distortion of the body; her concern

with and manipulation of masses and volume within composition, often expressed as a mass-void contrast combined with her overwhelming concentration on the figure frequently gives one the impression of looking at a painting-sculpture in an empty space for which a distant landscape later added. These elements, combined with a sensuous attitude toward her nudes, a palette of subdued tonal range, airless, vacuum quality, and the generally monumental/huge attitude of her subjects (a by-product of their spatial isolation) help form her notable style.

One of the most important elements of the Erlebacher hallmark emerged in the 1973 show as well: her concern meaning and content, her desire for the [content of] the pair to be aspirational, contemplative, rich. The first painting which this is true is *Apollo*, which the artist feels should be subtitled "the Apollonian Ideal in Question." This well-built in classic Apollonian stance is looking and pointing down and was intended as "the antithesis of the self-confident G-male. It is the notion of intellectuality in question," which artist felt was a product of the 'back-to-nature' movement of the late 1960s. Feeling, however, that the meaning of the pair was too esoteric, that the viewers couldn't "read" it correctly, she undertook *In Praise of the Earth* in 1972, completing it the next year. In this enormous work, six figures luxuriate on what appears to be the sloping top of a cliff or incline, sensuously reveling in the earth and the multitude of flora around them. Each of the numerous plants and flowers was of a different type, hardly two alike; each one is botanically correct and structurally perfect. The figures, in various attitudes of reclining, seem unable to tear themselves away from the ground, seem unable to fight the earth's gravity; so integrated are they to the landscape. This work successfully fulfills Erlebacher's intention to clarify and express her own post-back-to-nature feelings. Interestingly, she also shed the blo-



Judith Fritchman, *Earth-Maker Erlebacher, In a Garden*, 1972, oil on canvas, 84 x 84". Courtesy of the artist and the Judith Fritchman Foundation.

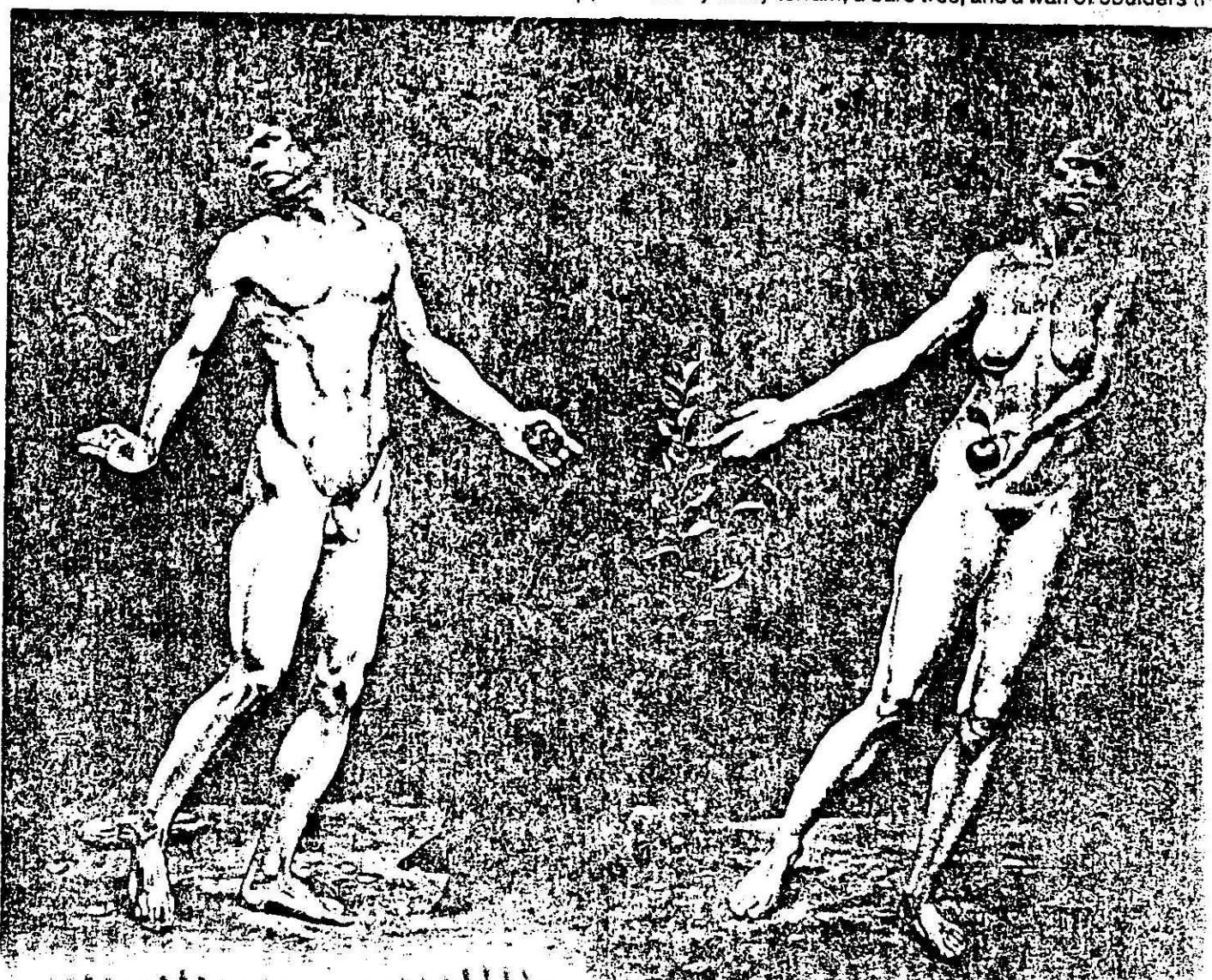
blue look of the earlier paintings, and employed oil paint and its fuller color range.

In Praise of the Earth was prototypical in her move to oil paint and its fuller palette, and a rich though comprehensible content that was expressive of her own feelings and philosophy. The paintings that followed, exhibited in 1975 at Schoelkopf, displayed her greatly improved draftsmanship and skill with the figure, resulting in a far greater naturalism and a loss of the stiffness that plagued the earlier depictions, as well as in an increased individuality of the figures. (It should be noted that the compositions and poses are not based on anything the artist has seen; they are mentally composed. Posing the models according to her mental layout, she then endeavors to portray those individuals as faithfully as she can. More and more she is using specific body types as an expressive mode.) What remained and grew was Erlebacher's concern for themes encompassing large concepts: time, love and sensuous joys, sin. A painting of the latter, of *Adam and Eve*, executed in 1975 on two panels, is the only work of this exhibition with a visible Renaissance reference, though here it is to the Northern style, particularly to that of Dürer. Separated physically on their own panels, and spotlit in a nighttime landscape that is barren except for a tree in each that seems to be pointing toward an exit, the figures physically express their feelings of isolation, exclusion, and expulsion. Emphasizing the latter are the poses used, a turning, twisted though stable contrapposto for Adam, a tilted, fleeing, off-balance diagonal stance for Eve. Though their apples are unbiten, their disturbed facial expressions, poses, and specifically non-paradisical settings tell us of their knowledge of their sin and ultimate fate. This work contrasts to the lush *Embrace* (1974) in which the voluptuous lovers luxuriate in a garden on rich drapery that also holds foods of the earth: fruits, wine, breads, cheese. A neutral, polar opposite to both of these is *Two Figures at the Sea* (1975), in which a

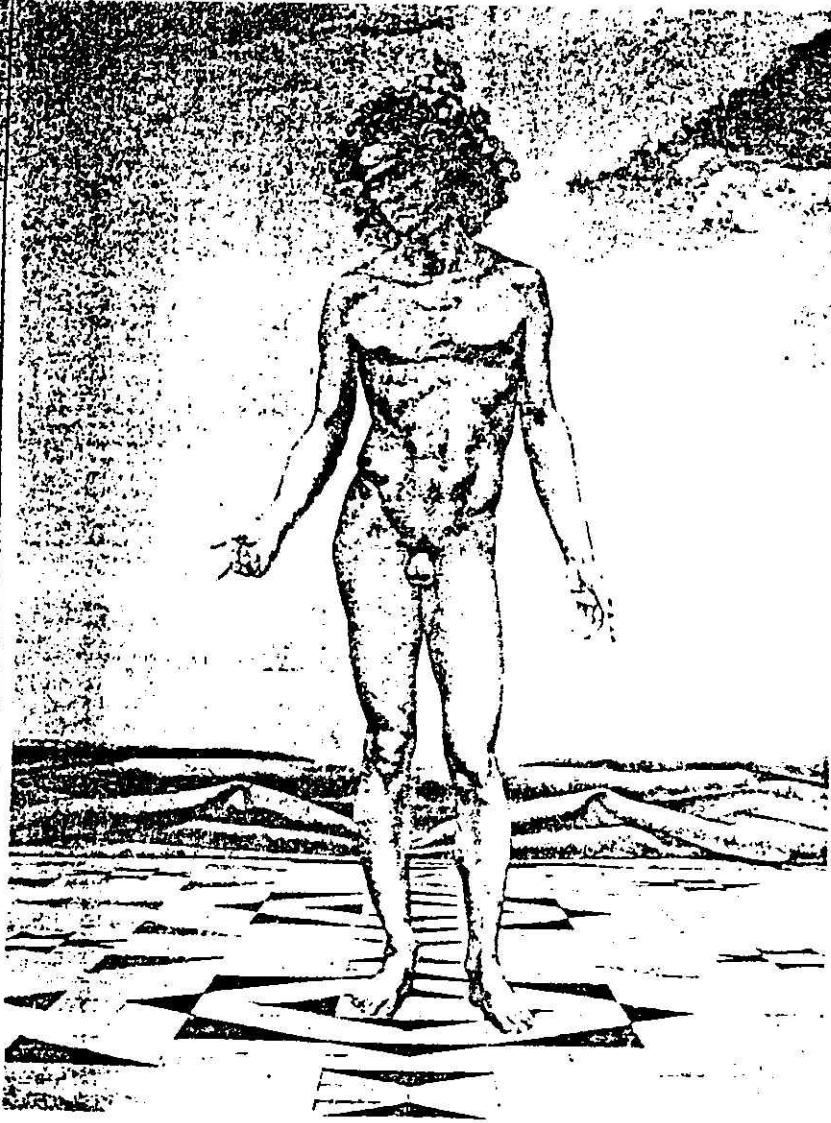
standing female nude faces and makes a two-handed gesture the sun, while a fully draped, sexually ambiguous figure sits in the sand of this desolate beach immediately behind the first figure, thus forming a triangle, staring in a direction not quite but almost opposite that of the other. Intended as an allegory Time, the nude looks to the future while the draped figure looks to the past; their triangular formation suggests the continuity of the one with the other, though this painting's meaning is not clear as that of the others.

The obtuseness of the *Two Figures at the Sea*, and of other earlier and later paintings is due to Erlebacher's creation of her own "mythology." Not wanting to paint scenes from the life of Christ, for example, as she "can't relate to them," she nevertheless desires to communicate portentous, universal concepts (that do occasionally touch on Old and New Testament matters), and therefore creates her own system of symbolic gestures, and relationships that, for their singularity, may not be universally recognized and understood. In the composition for which her "mythology" doesn't work, one gets the nagging feeling of looking at a work in a foreign language—the grainy, unnatural, symbolic gestures must mean something, but the cues are missed. This seems to happen less frequently; either continued exposure to Erlebacher's work is instruction in her special language, or the artist is broadening her symbols to increase their communicative values.

On the other hand, the wonderful aspect of any uncertainty interpretation is that the viewer can participate a little more freely and imaginatively. An example is *In A Garden* (1976), one of the major works in her New York show last spring. Placed in her mountainous garden that is here stripped bare of all foliage are three females, one standing, stretching nude, and two partially draped figures lying on the ground as if exhausted. The airless, physically uncomfortable feel of this painting is emphasized by rocky terrain, a bare tree, and a wall of boulders that



Martha
Mayer
Erle-
bacher,
*Adam and
Eve*, 1975.
Oil on
canvas,
two
panels,
each 64 x
40".
Courtesy
Robert
Schoel-
kopf
Galler



severely limits the depths of the painting's space, though the sensuous, well endowed standing figure, through which we feel springy, healthy muscles, and the utter relaxation of the other two appear to form a life/non-life contrast; the three women, then, are—the Three Graces on a break? The intended subject of this beautiful painting, though, is Despair, the garden and figures an interpretation of Christ's agony in the garden, but "it's so obtuse, too obtuse," as the artist admits, and therefore elusive in that sense, but a formidable work nonetheless.

This and other works in this most recent exhibit reveal Erlebacher's breakthroughs into a full palette, more completely natural figures, and a visually lush look that has become totally her own, one that has shed the earlier, adulatory references. The standing nude from the earlier *Two Figures at the Sea* has been painted again and stands alone here as the *Sungazer* (1976), now representing Hope. The second version brings us a trimmer, well rendered figure bathed in the orange directional light of the (unseen) sun at the horizon, backed by a painterly, unusually brushy scene of ocean waves breaking at the shore. The contrast of the blue-green of the sea to the figure's tawny orange thrusts the figure toward the viewer, though the nude here is well integrated into its landscape. Two other solitary nudes, representing *Modern Times* (1977-78) and *For My Country* (1977), are exemplary of Erlebacher's increased use of body type and physiognomy for greater expressiveness and allegory. Thus, the male flagholder's stocky, thick, disproportionate, balding body in the latter painting symbolically represents the country, a flawed country, though the work as a whole was meant as a Bicentennial tribute.

A cleaner, more contemporary look was also noticeable in this set of paintings, most notably in *Reclining Nude* (1978) and *Triumph of Nature* (1978), a small painting with a *vanitas*-like still-life array before the flowing-robed female. An anomaly of sorts is *St. John Neumann, 4th Bishop of*

Philadelphia (1978), done as an altarpiece with the donors deviation in the side panels, the saint as bishop at the altar the Basilica of St. Peter, and St. Paul in the center panel. With her own context, the sight of a format drawn from antiquity was not surprising; within the context of the altarpiece, the modern haircuts of the donor priests (they commissioned the work for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia) were momentarily shocking. The painting is the first in which the artist has used a full, rich saturated palette in which the deep red of the altarboys' robe the gold of the bishop's robes, and the lush textures of the basilica's interior and altar combine to create a visual feast that is indeed a celebration. Despite the departure from her usual subjects and settings, the work remains distinctly Erlebacher's the matte, multi-hued flesh tones, so painterly yet so smooth rendered, the key.

At this point, I can answer the questions that sent me to Pennsylvania. Martha Mayer Erlebacher is an intense, vibrant woman, a disciplined, tough-minded artist totally dedicated to the figure and the improvement of her skills in depicting it, and to the importance of art as an aspirational medium. Her paintings are combinations of the Italian Renaissance traditions the use of mass, naturalism, and an expositional content that relies on depictions of figures and objects as they truly are, with her contemporary concerns, her feelings and thoughts about people and the world around her.

"I like to think I draw my references from the past because I don't really think people have changed as much as they think they have . . . There's not that much difference in 200 or 30 years. The real difference is in science, not in psychology . . . I like to make paintings . . . that have meaning for more people than just an esoteric elite. I think that's crucial."

grist for our subsequent dreams.

One painting's title sums up the ambiguous essence of this powerful body of work: *Sustained Outbursts of Silence*.

GERARD HAGGERTY

Martha Mayer Erlebacher

FISCHBACH

Martha Mayer Erlebacher invents a personal iconography in oddly attractive paintings that sometimes telescope thousands of years of history and art into intriguing tableaux. Some works are clearly rooted in ancient Greece and the Renaissance. For example, there are two versions of the "Three Graces" theme in which one of the seated women has the hairstyle and dress of an archaic kore figure, while the others, nude or lightly draped, represent a more classical type of beauty. Erlebacher makes a traditional theme her own with vibrant color—a fuchsia satin drape, a glimmering violet dress—and by a charming note of historical progression.

In *Awaken*, the source of the imagery is more elusive. There is a suggestion of some prehistoric myth as a muscular young man in a loincloth whisks around in the center of a strange, barren landscape. In the darkened foreground young men and women are sprawled out in an almost spokelike pattern, asleep on bare rocks, while the background is lighted by a brilliant sunrise. The symmetry and frontality of the composition as well as the academically rigorous drawing and modeling of the figures are at odds with the man's dramatic gestures and the lurid coloring that sets him off.

Similarly, Erlebacher's still lifes offer

an element of surprise. With their dark backgrounds, balanced compositions, and attention to detail, they somewhat recall the work of early American artist Raphael Peale. But into this Old Master-ish ambience Erlebacher introduces unexpected flashes of intense color, as in *Mango*, where the dark background and homely wood table are punctuated at dead center by a bowl of bright yellow lemons and bananas above an orangy-red mango on an iridescent green-and-red cloth.

RUTH BASS

Mark Metcalf

ASSOCIATED AMERICAN ARTISTS

Coney Island usually brings to mind images of teeming beaches overrun by the urban masses, but Mark Metcalf, in his panoramic paintings, finds instead a striking emptiness. There's a poignancy in his amusement-park rides rising through haze over nearly deserted streets and run-down subway platforms. These vistas distance us from grime and clutter, dissolving weathered concrete and faded signs into a harmonious, luminous architecture. Amid the vastness, a few figures emerge as notes of color. Metcalf finds a mellow, romantic glow in these settings tinged with melancholy and reverie.

There's something cinematic about this series of paintings as a whole, which includes a long shot of the park from dunes across the bay and various close-ups of its elements. The emphasis on train tracks implies a narrative of arrival or departure, while his use of dramatic light helps establish mood. Buildings loom in the evening sun, which creates a delicate mesh of shadows and reflections on the girders of the Cyclone.

This soft-focus realism endows build-

ings and people with seductive esthetic appeal but distances us from their human drama, and Metcalf's scenes occasionally dissolve into vagueness. Yet like Hopper, an obvious influence, Metcalf documents a contemporary attitude toward the city by dramatizing humble subjects that resonate in our imaginations. Where Hopper suggests that urban life is stark and lonely, Metcalf evokes some previous time when things might have been better. He captures our current nostalgia for Hopper's world with an even simpler, more heroic urban past. HEARNE PARDEE

Jane Schneider

JUNE KELLY

Jane Schneider's nine wood sculptures in this show were impressive and appealing. Shaped from upstate New York trees, the larger pieces retain their uprightness and girth. They dominated the gallery like the larger-than-life women for whom they are named: Lilith, Sappho, Lady Godiva, Lorelei, Iphigenia. There were also several smaller works that suggest aspects of powerful women: the butterfly touch of Psyche, Cleopatra's double crown, a stela (with text in cryptic pictographs) for martyred St. Lucie.

According to myth, all trees were inhabited by female spirits, such as Daphne, a nymph who turned into a tree to escape Apollo's pursuit. Their rootedness can be seen as a metaphor for women's conflicts between continuity and change. Whether as empowerment or transcendence, some of these sculptures have both male and female body parts, just as in Brancusi's erotic archetypes.

One of the most powerful works on view was *Iphigenia*, a slender totem whose hollowed interior contains clusters



Jane Schneider, *Lorelei*, 1994,
wood and mixed media.
48" x 56" x 32".
June Kelly.



Mark Metcalf,
Dreamland, 1993,
oil on canvas, 24" x 96".
Associated American Artists.



Martha Mayer Erlebacher,
The Three Graces, 1993,
oil on canvas, 24" x 28".
Fischbach.

MARTHA MAYER ERLEBACHER

Martha Mayer Erlebacher was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, in 1937. She attended Pratt Institute, where she received her MA in 1963. She has been visiting lecturer and teacher at several colleges and universities in the United States. She lives outside Philadelphia.

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RLEBACHER IS AN UNABASHEDLY TRADITIONAL ARTIST. SHE CAME TO FIGURATIVE REALISM after studying abstract painting and industrial design in college and graduate school. Frustrated by the inability of abstract art to "talk about human life in a way most people can relate to" (Wilson 1985), she turned to the narrative and symbolic potency of recognizable imagery. She continues to refine her skills as a representational artist through the diligent study of anatomy and constant practice of drawing from life.

Standing Nude with Cloth is rich with allusions to the drawings of Dürer, Raphael, and Ingres. Turned away from the viewer, head in profile, the model, holding drapery, is the embodiment of classic academic conventions. Erlebacher's treatment of the subject is no less traditional. Exploiting the vertical weave of the Roma paper, she skims the pencil across the grain to create the tone of the middle ground. Using an eraser for highlighting, she carefully controls delicate gradations.

Erlebacher incorporates her studies of the human figure into her large allegorical paintings of philosophical and mythological subjects with contemporary overtones. She has learned to use the methods of the past to make her timely visual statements.

24. *Standing Nude with Cloth*

Graphite, 17 x 14 in.

Signed lower left on back

Martha Mayer Erlebacher is leading the field of contemporary painting into some of the toughest aesthetic territory around. It is the extraordinary expanse opening up to painters when, as Erlebacher herself says, "the human experience is the proper subject matter of art."

What's so tough about it is that in this territory none of the inculcated programmatic approaches to making paintings will work since they have favored formal issues almost to the exclusion of traditional considerations of content, and have limited research to "analytic and cognitive ways of looking at pictorial space," to quote Erlebacher's own succinct words. Neither the Modernist strategy of irony will work, nor the Post Modernist device of simulation. And the same applies to many of the attempts at reviving Neo-classical canons and Academic treatises on painting occurring in various representational art circles.

On the contrary, a constantly renewing, bold attitude of free and critical inquiry into the nature of things is sufficient, and is the only genuine guide a painter needs.

Erlebacher has this attitude of course. She is an artist who dares to go wherever it is that her ideas and feelings about art and life lead. Whether that means breaking new ground dealing with content of a difficult and elusive character other artists have tended to shy away from, or tackling themes done countless times before through the history of art by even the most famous old masters.

The ambitious scope of her recent paintings is but a measure of this artist's passionate commitment to painting, and willingness to rise to the special challenge it presents.

✓ *Danse Macabre* (1986, p.11), a painting prompted by Erlebacher's own deep concerns over the possible destruction of the earth reveals the metaphorical heights well within the reach of her vision. In the painting are depicted what she calls "the four ways the world as we know it can end—Pollution, Disease and Famine, Overpopulation, and Nuclear War." To portray them, Erlebacher has chosen to invent a symbolic iconography just for this purpose.

Figures of men and women stand for the ways the world can end, their forms carefully worked out so that they contain references to the particular scourges being embodied. For instance, the rainbow patterns covering Pollution, the female figure on the extreme left, refer to the colorful bands reflected on the surfaces of industrial wastes as on oil slicks, and in smog.

What makes these personifications more than intellectual figments is the overall dramatic context of the composition. On a cloudy, moon-lit night, along a narrow stretch of fallow bluff miles from the busy highways indicated by the lights in the far distance below, this fearsome foursome is performing a strange dance at the command of none other than Death for a special audience of one, Nature.

An attractive young woman, half-dressed in a fine robe, Nature is seated on a rock in a contemplative pose. She appears resigned to the state of calamity, signified by the tulips fallen from her hand and the open grave at her foot. Behind her stands Death, shown in traditional guise as a human skeleton. In contrast to Nature, he appears excited and to be enjoying the opportunity of talking to her about the performance, perhaps. In the shock aroused by contemplating the consequences of Death in such close and intimate proximity to Nature, the growing awareness sinks in that, in thinking about Nature's vulnerability to the apparent dangers surrounding her in this composition, we are really seeing pictured our own end.

essay continued page 12

The Elements I: Air (Childhood), and *The Elements II: Fire (Youth)*, both 1987, pp. 6,7), show how comprehensive her approach to painting can be. The paintings, which belong to the series Erlebacher is devoting to the four elements once thought to be the basic principles of the universe, are the products of much study and reflection on her part. For each element, she taught herself about the many philosophical and cultural implications it has carried through the centuries and devised a chart listing its major characteristics. For example, she found Air to be the element associated with childhood and morning, while youth and noon are among the traditional signs of Fire. The symbolic ideas in each painting are consistent with the intrinsic qualities of the specific element. And not surprisingly for Erlebacher, there is a humanistic foundation to her interpretations.

The painting of Air is a serene and idealized view of childhood evoking the spiritual aspects of its subject matter. Featured is a group of five little girls shown relating to pigeons and spring flowers—two symbols of Air—in the central portion of the composition whose register-like tripartite structure with colorful geometric bands running along top and bottom recalls the conventions of ancient Egyptian painting. Painted a subtle rose, this central area gives the illusion of infinite space because of the frontal and shadowless treatment of the forms placed in it. The general hieratic impression made by this scene is enhanced by the overlapping arrangement of the figures of the girls, which, by creating cascading rhythmical harmonies of line and plane, endow the different standing and kneeling positions they take with ritualistic resonance.

For Erlebacher, "the quintessential aspect of Fire and youth is the rising of passion," she says. The painting of Fire is a universal love story told in three episodic scenes in a single unified setting of a summer landscape. The story begins with the engendering of passion, the phase acted out by a trio of figures on the

left in which the identity of the male and female lovers is being settled. The active stage of passion is given expression by the embracing couple, while the sleeping female below and in front of them corresponds to the sensual aftermath of spent passion. Reiterating the story on abstract and metaphorical levels is the formal organization of the composition. Consider how the planar construction is moving the space diagonally in directions intensifying the narrative flow of the story which itself proceeds forward from left to right. And how the theme of rising passion is built as well into value and tonal structures of this painting with its intense yellow passages, yellow being the traditional color of fire. Individual forms can also comment on the action; for example, the whirlwind of love-making illustrated by the couple is suggested in the swirling configurations of the drapery behind them. /

The power of Erlebacher's imagination can be appreciated in recent paintings in which psychological content is handled with incredible insight. In *The Acknowledgement of Memory* (1986, p.2), Erlebacher is capturing the complex of contradictory feelings accompanying the act of remembering. The way memory enters the active consciousness is illustrated by her as a dramatic confrontation between the same female figure shown twice. Of the ideal body type favored by Erlebacher, the nude female is a personification representing on the right, the present, and on the left, a person's past. The contradictory feelings provoked when things cease to be forgotten, the surprise, guilt and regret mingled with various degrees of release and some satisfaction even—those are indicated by her gesture. And the flooding of the mind that often happens is expressed on another metaphorical level by the diaphanous piece of drapery and by the agitated patterns and halo-like lights it forms in the area around her head.

Just as sophisticated in conception are *To Sleep I* (1985, cover) and *The Awareness of Consciousness* (1987, p.3), two paintings in which the artist is continuing her explorations of the various shades of the symbolic meaning of rest, the important ones being death and renewal.

Dusk II (1987, p.13) is the latest example in Erlebacher's on-going series of paintings investigating "the female figure as a personification of time." *Woman in Black* (1985) and *Man in a Red Beret* (1986, p.14) both recall her commitment to portraiture as well as admiration for the clear light in Northern Renaissance painting which is equaled in the illuminated faces featured in these small oils.

Continuity is shown to be an important factor in Erlebacher's development as well, by the still life oil paintings she started in 1985. As with the earlier series of still lifes she did in watercolor, the present series serves as a means allowing her to investigate the "history of art." Erlebacher's paintings, while they are inspired by different thematic traditions, schools, and major stylistic periods of still life painting, are showcases for the delight she takes in rendering material qualities and in revealing what she calls "the mystery of abstract relationships in the placement of objects." *Spanish Still Life I*, *Spanish Still Life II* (p.17), *Three Quinces* (p.18), *Black Still Life* (p.19), all 1986, are among the stunning examples demonstrating her peerless technical control and depth of understanding she brings to the genre of still life, that permits her to recreate it anew with each painting.

To say on the basis of this body of work that she has become "the complete painter," someone that is fully capable of realizing painting's potential for description, is for Martha Mayer Erlebacher no exaggeration.

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Deena
1985
pencil, 15x21"
study for
Woman in Black

