

Irving Norman

by Valery Oisteanu

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Recently, the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery became the exclusive representative for the estate of California artist Irving Norman (1906–1989); in a mini-retrospective/resurrection, the venue is displaying nine large oil-on-canvas works and six drawings on paper from the 1940s through the 1980s.

Irving Norman's oversized paintings are multi-layered visions of urban hell, featuring myriad Munch-like "Scream" faces crammed into coffins and masses of bodies locked in bondage, often dwarfed by giant machinery and military weapons. Paradoxically, the work is also imbued with optimism, implying a belief that these tumultuous images could be catalysts for social reform.

Born Isaac Noachowitz in Vilnius (then part of the Russian Empire, now Lithuania) in 1906, Norman emigrated to the United States in 1923 and became a barber in Monticello, New York. He joined the Young Communist League and remained affiliated with the Communist Party until 1939. He didn't begin to create art until he was in his thirties, after experiencing the Spanish Civil War (he had joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade as a machine gunner), when dark visions spilled out into highly detailed panoramas that brutally recounted the inhumanity of armed conflict, the inequity of capitalism, and the tyranny of the moneyed elite.

Early on Norman could be described as a social realist (some say influenced by the hyperrealist Peter Blume) invested in delivering stinging social critiques. He was at this time, however, more interested in elder masters such as Bosch, Breughel and Grunewald. He had not yet seen much European Surrealism, although he was very fond of the works by Picasso he viewed at the Museum of Modern Art. Nor was he aware of Surrealism's political side, as in Breton's "Second Manifesto: Surrealism in Service of the Revolution" of 1930.

Historically, Surrealism has been clearly associated with left-leaning philosophies, its political radicalism expressed through dreamlike paintings and anti-art objects, absurdist theater and experimental film, all full of hallucinatory images extracted from the subconscious. However, among the American social surrealists—James Guy, Walter Quirt, David Smith, and O. Luis Guglielmi—the strongest esthetic influence came from Salvador Dalí (although Guglielmi distanced himself from Dalí and criticized him for his rightist views). By the 1940s, the entire surrealist group from Paris had fled to New York, their international network revolving around André Breton. Norman, who was studying at the Art Students League, was attracted to the scene.

As he became more exposed to the East Coast avant-garde, Norman's work evolved into "abstract realism" (his own characterization, stated in 1967) and soon adopted elements of magic-realism and socio-surrealism. His symbolic lexicon consisted of naked humanoid figures, naked babies, square boxes inhabited by distorted human heads, prison cell windows, skulls, and always hordes of suffering beings packed into towering skyscrapers.

In the large drawing titled "Woman Ship Welder" (1943), three naked women represent desperate members of the lumpenproletariat. One is symbolically prevented from having a child by an industrial metal hand that yanks her back from her pursuit of a floating fetus; another stands in a graveyard, gaunt and exhaling clouds of smoke; the third is depicted welding in an attic-like, confining space, surrounded by writhing, serpentine fumes. And in another drawing from 1943, "Laissez-Faire Industrialism," laborers with skull-like heads attached to pink, exposed lungs are emblazoned on the brick walls of smokestack-sprouting factories. An S-shaped steel beam curving around the workers' heads, across their necks and under their lungs turn them into giant dollar signs receding into the distance. An archway above them reads Profits Un Ltd. ("unlimited").



Irving Norman (1906-1989), *The Draftee*, 1982
oil on canvas, 100" x 38", signed

According to Ilene Susan Fort (in the Archives of American Art Journal, January 1982), this form of social surrealism was “an American borrowing of European surrealist techniques applied to social commentary and criticism,” in a kind of regional approach. But Norman was not so much nationalistic or regionalist as he was Jewish-American, of cosmopolitan European descent, and his proletarian internationalism was informed by his leftist views and ingrained in his conscience by the horrors of war. “Social surrealism” per se became a neat sub-category that art historians invented to explain special visions such as Norman’s, but in fact his art was more faceted than that, compressing many directions of the early 20th century avant-garde, such as Neue Sachlichkeit, Expressionism, Metaphysical Art, Magic Realism, and the socio-political practice of the Mexican muralists.

Norman himself traveled to Mexico around 1946, specifically to see the murals being made by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. The effects of the visit are evident in the lavish size of his paintings, which are filled with modular mural elements repeated like the passages of a symphony. Art historians have also suggested that his influences included the Viennese artists of the 1950s who were grouped under the banner of Fantastic Realism (Ernst Fuchs, Arik Brauer, et alia.). The work of these artists feature a clarity of detail that some have compared to early Flemish painting, except their subjects were, like Norman’s, drone-like humans dwarfed by the towering structures of modern Babel.

During these postwar years, Norman faced the ramifications of the communist witch-hunts. In interviews, Norman’s widow, Hela, has told stories of his being blacklisted for more than two decades. (In 1959, the couple sought the assistance of the American Civil Liberties Union, which successfully sued the FBI to stop overt interrogations and harassment of the couple.) Hela notes that while many visiting curators and museum directors expressed an interest in buying and exhibiting his art, precious few did (or felt they could) until the 1970s.

The ultimate release of the Normans’ FBI files proved that the couple’s claims of persecution were not simply paranoia. The FBI, unaware that Norman had dropped all political affiliations, was still searching his mail for information about other “subversive” artists as late as 1974.

Meanwhile, Norman’s art continued to evolve, introducing new modular elements like the arrows-cum-missiles arrayed in vertical formations in works such as “War Wounded” (1960) and “Cityscape” (1955). Sometimes the arrow-missiles became cranes, skyscrapers, or totems, as in “Prisoner” (1950), “Pile Drivers” (1945), and “M.F.I. Complex” (1988). Norman’s notion of the dark megalopolis is illuminated by his color harmonies and impeccable drawing, creating urban panoramas that evoke a New York or Tokyo gone haywire.

The arrow motif reappears in an updated incarnation in “Funeral of the Gods” (1968), depicting a surreal supersonic Concord filled with enlarged human heads, flying up above the clouds accompanied by six other planes filled with naked women and naked soldiers brandishing swords. “Liberation War Prisoners” (1970-‘71), probably relating to Vietnam-era POWs, reveals seven naked, emaciated men and women tied with rope and being dragged across cobblestones by a metallic-looking Teutonic army officer.

Perhaps the strongest image in this show is the painting “The Draftee” (1982), showing a robotic embodiment of the war machine—a spiked-helmeted skull for a head and cannons for limbs—in the foreground and a naked man behind. The man’s groin becomes the robot’s neck, adorned by an Iron Cross hanging from a chain, and his finger points enigmatically toward the robot’s shoulder, as if he were operating it or pointing toward the fate that awaits him. In the background, two other naked men grimly peer from barred windows in a solid brick wall.

Irving Norman aimed only, as he put it, “to tell the truth of our time” and “to hold a neurotic mirror to a disordered world,” but his imagery was more like the unmasking of human nature. He once wrote, “I want all my efforts displayed, so that hopefully they would have a humanizing effect on people that see it.” He partially fulfilled his wish: Once viewed, his paintings and drawings are not easily forgotten. The spectator becomes engaged in his miniature worlds, synthesized on big, wall-size works teeming with thousands of tiny, naked humans. Despite their clear, vibrant, often joyful colors, the paintings are bitter critiques of life, processions of ghostly and ghostly apparitions, doomed workers, and dead soldiers.

Norman remained a social surrealist until the end of his life, and although he lamented the neglect that had befallen his art, he never stopped hoping for a change of fortune. A century after his birth, and twenty years after his death, he finally achieves that elusive recognition.

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