

“On Tibor Freund”

Tibor Freund’s interest in kinetics, luminosity, space, temporality, and surface place him in a high profile, international artistic community. One thinks of the iron sculptures of Jean Tingley; the grids of Victor Vasarely; the Op works of Bridget Riley. Perhaps what sets Freund apart from his better-known colleagues is that his paintings emphasize nature, body, even object hood; they convey a ringing physicality.

Freund, born in Budapest, Hungary in 1910, lived through two world wars, and made an astonishing body of work. Most notable are his visceral, architectural paintings that appear at once earthbound and astral.

Freund had an unusual nomadic professional life before moving to New York in 1953 and beginning to paint seriously. In 1932 he earned an architecture degree in Zurich. Eight years later he went to Tehran, built a sample town and was a maintenance artist for the Golden Mosque, opened a portrait studio and eventually supervised the architecture of the Palace of Justice. In 1947 he returned to Budapest and continued his work on architecture and industrial designs. But he, like many individuals at that time, was displaced by the expansion of the Soviet Empire and relocated, first to Israel, where he lived for four years, then, finally, New York where he spent the rest of his life (Freund died in 2007).

He developed notoriety in New York in the late 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s due primarily to his creation of “motion paintings” in 1957 to “show our world in motion as seen by the spectator in motion.” He acknowledged the influence of fellow Hungarian born artist, Maholy-Nagy, whose book, *Vision in Motion*, brought up the issue of the mobile viewer. By fusing up to 4 picture planes into a single composition, Freund was able to create the illusion of change and motion as the viewer looked at the painting from various angles, thus capturing the modern tempo surrounding him. In 1962-3, Freund’s theory of PAINTING IN SPACE predicted that he would “set canvas-bound painting free”:

- Painters create the illusion of 3 dimensional SPACE
- by putting paint onto 2 dimensional PLANES.
- In order to create the illusion of 4 dimensional MOTION

- I am putting paint into 3 dimensional SPACE.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Freund had a total of 6 one man shows in New York City. The first at the Galerie Norval (1960), the second two at The Contemporaries (1965, 1967) and the final three at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery (1969, 1971, 1974). He was also featured in several traveling exhibitions and, in a triumphant return to his home country of Hungary, his work was exhibited along side that of Picasso, Vasarely, Arp and Chagall in 1971.

The themes of nature, body and physicality recall another Hungarian, the novelist Sandor Marai, also Jewish, born in 1900, who wrote so astutely about the Hungarian Empire in novels such as *Embers*. There are interesting similarities and differences between these men. Both lived through periods of being lauded as a genius and being virtually unknown. Both left Hungary permanently because of Soviet rule. Both were highly educated but also influenced by folk knowledge and traditions of the Eastern European culture they grew up in. Both experienced life under the Hungarian empire, its violent dissolution, and the following development of capitalism in Western Europe and the United States. While Marai's interest was in illuminating the past, Freund was a visionary—addressing the very current issues of humanism and urbanism with an eye toward the excitement and hope of the future and the mysteries of outer space.

In reviewing Marai's novels for *Guardian* (Jan 2002), the Hungarian born novelist Tibor Fischer writes, "his books really do, by some strange alchemy, make one feel a better person." The same could be said for viewing Freund's paintings. Freund had faith that art was one way to foster tolerance, as evidenced by his quote: Man has to learn to look at things from various angles, to see the other fellow's viewpoint. This will lead, through mutual understanding, to Peace. It is hard to think of a more relevant set of considerations than for the early 21st century, and it is a useful starting point to consider the work of this most remarkable artist.

- Lynn Crawford

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