

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW



## TATIANA TROUVÉ

GABRIEL OROZCO

IRVING PETLIN

MICHELLE GRABNER

plus ART GOES BACK  
TO SCHOOL

# IRVING PETLIN THE COMMITTED BRUSHSTROKE



On the occasion of three concurrent New York exhibitions, Peter Selz, a friend of Irving Petlin since the '70s, bears witness to the painter's five-decade-long career of passionate political and artistic engagement.

BY PETER SELZ



FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS, Irving Petlin has remained a steadfast proponent of art as both a moral and esthetic enterprise. It is his conviction that the task of the artist is to transmit this sense of commitment to the world. Petlin began his career as a figurative painter, and though cognizant of the formal achievements of abstract modernism in all its manifestations, he has persevered in expressing his imagination in a figurative mode. He was born in 1934 in Chicago to Orthodox Jewish

Irving Petlin: *Entry of Christ into Washington*, 2005, oil and pastel on linen, triptych, 65 by 147 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches overall. All photos this article, except p. 110, courtesy Kent Gallery, New York.

#### CURRENTLY ON VIEW

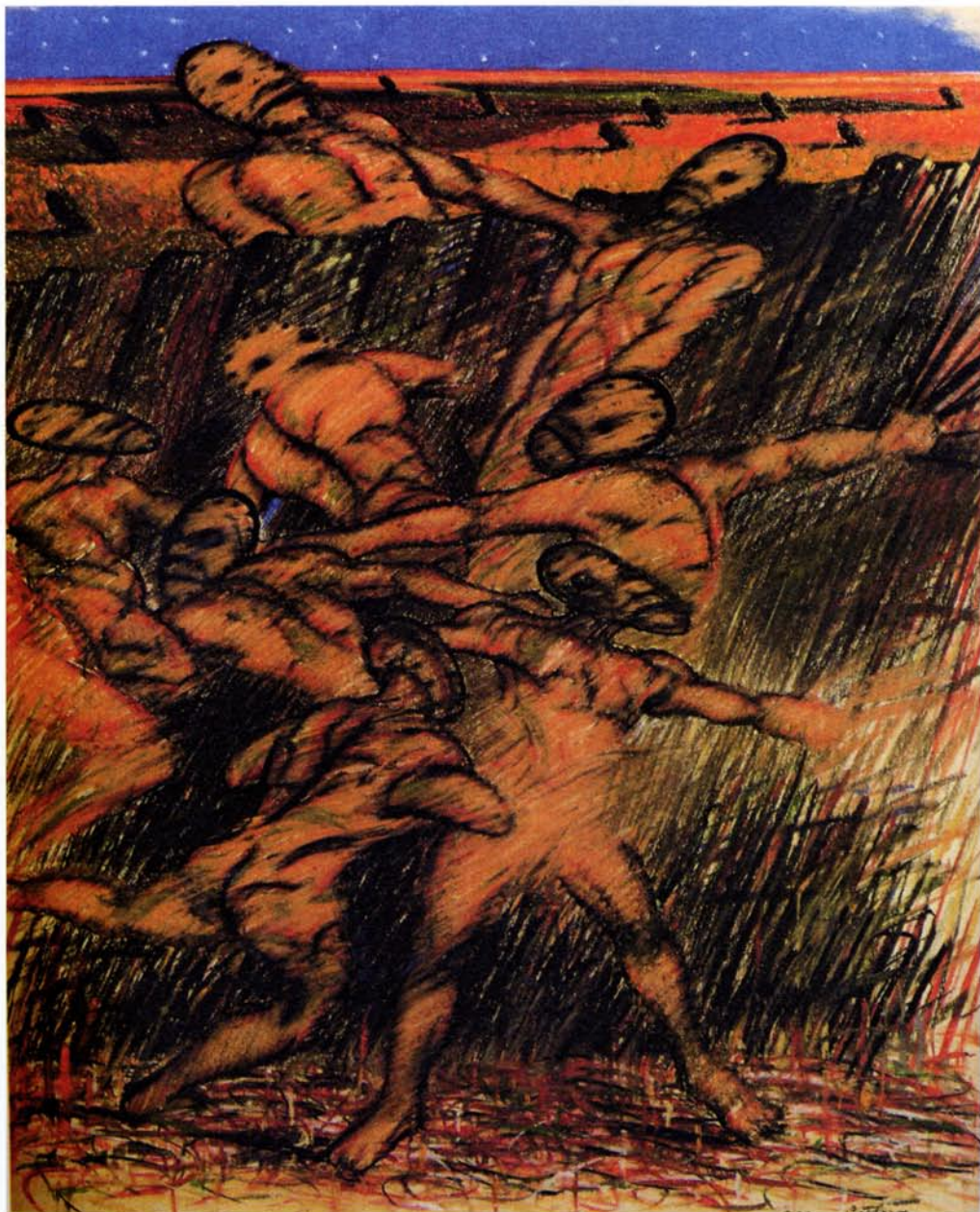
Solo exhibitions by Irving Petlin in New York at Kent Gallery, to Mar. 27; Jan Krugier Gallery, to Apr. 2; and Richard L. Feigen & Co., to Apr. 16.

parents, immigrants from Poland. Forty-nine members of his father's family were to perish at Treblinka, and while Petlin never refers to that trauma directly in his work, it is deeply ingrained in both his art and his thinking.

When Petlin was 13 years old he received a youth scholarship to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and, at 17, entered the program as a full-time student. He was then painting in the dominant Abstract Expressionist style. But three successive exhibitions at the museum in 1950-52—of Munch, van Gogh and Cézanne—left an indelible imprint, and Petlin began his exploration of the unquiet human figure. The physicality of van Gogh's paintings only reinforced the importance to Petlin of gestural brushwork, a lesson he learned from his experimentation with abstraction.

During World War II, many Chicago collectors of contemporary art were purchasing Surrealist paintings, giving the movement a presence in the artistic life of the city, a factor that would be influential in the development of Petlin's work. After the war, prominent Chicago collectors like Joseph Randall Shapiro (founder of the Museum of Contemporary Art), who also invited local artists, Petlin among them, into their homes, were acquiring the work of Joseph Cornell and Jean Dubuffet, among others. Accompanied by Alfonso Ossorio, Dubuffet came to the Arts Club of Chicago in 1951 to deliver his now famous lecture, "Anticultural Positions." Striking something of an anarchist's stance, Dubuffet declared, "Creative energy has surely no greater enemy than social order, with all the appeals to adapt, to conform, to mimic, which social relationships imply."<sup>1</sup> Many young Chicago artists, including Petlin—who was impressed by Dubuffet's radical position—were in the audience. They were also affected by Roberto Matta's fantastic dream images of vaporous beings floating in space; Matta was appointed a visiting professor at the Art Institute in 1954, and Petlin attended a lecture course given by him.

This was the environment in which a generation of artists, some of whom were to fill the ranks of the Monster Roster and Chicago Imagists, came of age. Such artists as Leon Golub, George Cohen, Cosmo Camoli, June Leaf, Seymour Rosofsky, Nancy Spero and H.C. Westermann began to find, in the years following the war, that they were no longer satisfied with pure abstraction. For them, unlike the Abstract Expressionists, a formalist approach seemed inadequate for the expression of post-



*Hundred Fighting Men*, 1962, pastel on paper, 34 by 28 inches.

war anxiety and anomie, a sense of incomprehension about the death camps, and horror and guilt over the atomic incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although he was a decade younger than most of these Chicago artists, Petlin shared their esthetic outlook. He, and they, felt as Philip Guston would during the Vietnam War era, when he embraced figuration after many years as a successful abstract painter. As Guston remarked to Dore Ashton in 1969, "Who is a painter after all? Man is an imagemaker and painting *is* imagemaking. The abstract painters—what are they telling us? That this is the absolute? Well, all right, so is this beer glass."<sup>2</sup>

After graduating from the Art Institute in 1956, Petlin was awarded a fellowship to Yale University.<sup>3</sup> There he studied with the teacher who had recruited him, Josef Albers, who stressed experimentation but also selectively valued tradition. Although Petlin was making biomorphic figurative paintings

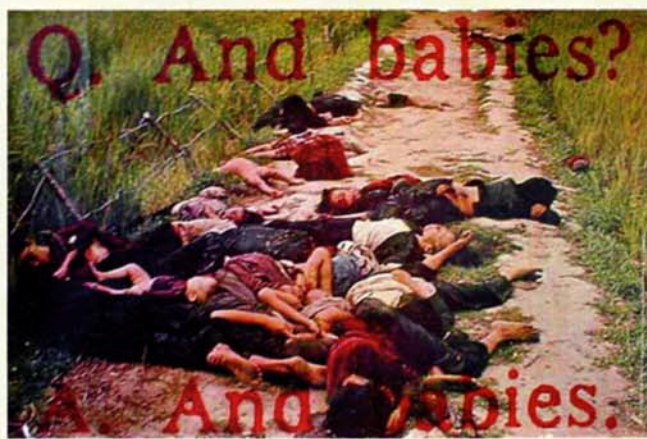
**PETLIN SHARED WITH HIS FRIENDS LEON GOLUB AND NANCY SPERO AN ACTIVIST'S OUTLOOK ON ART—WHICH IS TO SAY, A SENSE OF THE ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ARTIST.**

that differed essentially from Albers's colored squares, Albers was taken by some color studies that the young artist was producing and used them in his classes. In 1957, while still enrolled at Yale, Petlin was drafted into the Army. He continued to paint at night while serving at the Presidio in San Francisco, mounted a show at that city's Dilexi Gallery in 1958, and completed the paintings for his thesis exhibition in 1959 (which he attended on leave). After being discharged from the military, he immediately left for Paris, where he resumed his friendship with the Chicagoans living there—Golub, Spero and Leaf. Matta was helpful in introducing him to the Paris art world, and he met Balthus, Ernst and Giacometti.

Following a solo exhibition of small surrealist-tinged paintings at the prestigious Galerie du Dragon in Paris in 1960, Petlin, retracing van Gogh's steps, traveled to the south of France, where he produced his pastel series "Arles" (1961), in which demonlike creatures are depicted in a sun-drenched landscape. It is an early example of Petlin working serially, the basic approach he would take to art-making throughout his career. Pastel has likewise continued to be a favorite medium, both for the intense concentration it requires (since pastel is not easily revised) and for its ability to convey non-naturalistic and mysterious effects. In this, Petlin's work recalls that of Odilon Redon. Maurice Fabre, a

friend of the Symbolist artist, wrote in 1886 that the essence of Redon's images is the "tragic and sublime problem of the Unknowable."<sup>4</sup> The remark could apply as well to Petlin's art.

PETLIN CONTINUED TO WORK on various series in Paris in the years that followed, producing his first political works during the turmoil of the early '60s. The pastels in "Hundred Fighting Men" (1962) are based on the student riots against the Algerian war, and on a notorious incident he witnessed. Trapped in the Charonne Métro station in February 1962 during a demonstration, Petlin saw nine people clubbed to death by the police. A highly personal interpretation of the bestial events he had seen, a furious tangle of lines reveals young men closely fighting with each other against the backdrop of a wall that presses them forward



Above, *And Babies*, 1969, offset lithograph poster, 25 by 38 inches, collaboration between Petlin, Frazer Dougherty and Jon Hendricks, using a photograph by Ronald Haerberle.

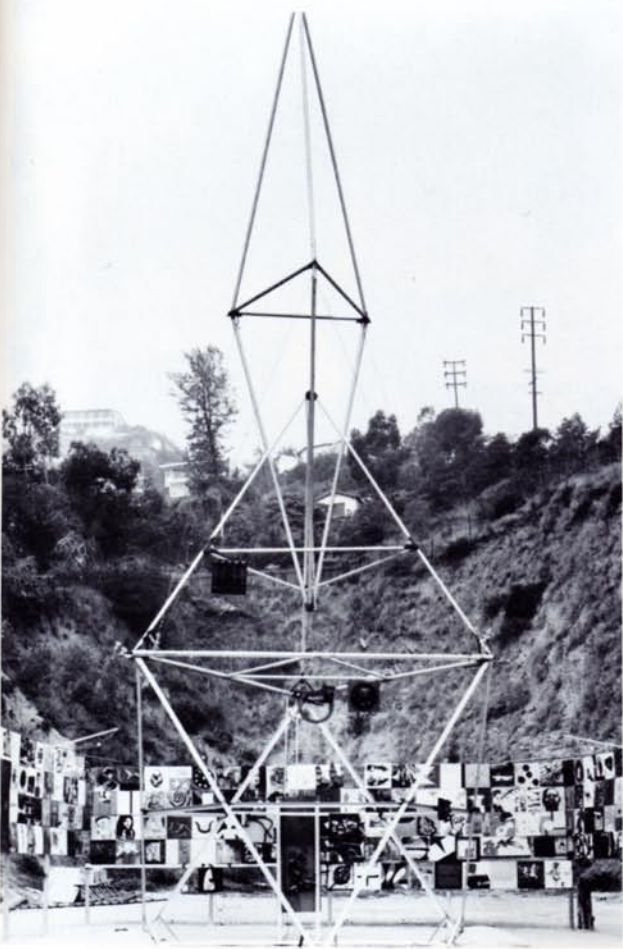
Left, *Peace Tower*, 1966, 60-foot-tall steel tower and paintings by approx. 400 artists. Photographer unknown.

into a shallow pictorial plane, separate from the landscape beyond.

Meanwhile, the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and the war in Vietnam were heating up. In 1963, upon reading reports in the *Herald Tribune* about the vicious assault by police and dogs on black demonstrators in Birmingham, Ala., and other affronts, Petlin began a devastating series of paintings, "Men and Dogs"

(1963-64), which was shown in 1964 at the Galerie du Dragon and, two years later, at his first museum exhibition, at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. Casting Petlin in the tradition of outraged commentators going back to Goya and Géricault, the critic Edouard Glissant observed in the Galerie du Dragon catalogue that "the inconceivable monsters of the past are now engaged in lynching and killing," and wrote that Petlin "does not accept a rupture between the fundamental essence of painting and commitment to current subjects."<sup>5</sup>

Later in 1964, Petlin was invited to UCLA as a visiting artist, along with Richard Diebenkorn and Llyn Foulkes. Early on, Petlin became aware of the explosive situation in the



## AS HE NEARED HIS 50s, PETLIN TURNED TO THE SUBJECT OF HIS OWN JEWISH BACKGROUND AND TO LIFE IN THE POLISH SHTETL AND GHETTO.

black ghettos of the city and, six months before the Watts riots erupted, began *The Burning of Los Angeles* (1965-67). Measuring some 20 feet across, this four-panel polyptych shows black men struggling to escape deep traps in the earth; behind them are hills striated in brown and black. "The lines of paint and drawing would never totally line up with one another," Petlin told me. "These ruptures of the narrative go all through the picture. The sky itself is really like an El Greco sky. It's a reflection of what's happening on the ground."<sup>6</sup>

Petlin was the principal organizer, in 1964, of the Artists' Protest Committee, which targeted the RAND Corporation (the think tank planning "McNamara's war") and staged public debates about the Vietnam War. He was also one of the co-organizers of the Los Angeles *Peace Tower*, along with John Weber, director of Dwan Gallery in L.A.; Phillip Leider, editor of *Artforum*; and Walter Hopps, director of the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum). Petlin managed to lease a site at the intersection of La Cienega and Sunset from a landlord who was not told about the subversive activities in the office. A permit was obtained and Petlin approached Mark di Suvero, a Dwan artist who, with Judy Chicago (then Judy Gerowitz) and Lloyd Hamrol, constructed the nearly 60-foot-high steel tower, using funds raised by a committee headed by Arnold Mesches.<sup>7</sup> The organizers sent out a worldwide "Call from the Artists of Los Angeles" and received 2-by-2-foot paintings from some 400 artists, which were installed around the tower. Telegrams of support were sent by Picasso, André Breton, Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre, among others. The tower, which stood for three months beginning in February 1966, was shown on television almost every night and had to be guarded. It was frequently vandalized and the artists assaulted. Petlin recalls, "The off-duty sheriffs' deputies were fascists, driving around in black Porsches, with their Dobermans. They beat us up. We were attacked by troops from nearby bases who were told, 'Go wreck the tower.'"

Petlin moved to New York in 1967, continuing his activism. Most famously, in 1969 he joined the Art Workers Coalition and, collaborating with Frazer Dougherty and Jon Hendricks, created one of the most incendiary protest posters of the Vietnam War era. The poster reproduced a notorious image of the dead, including children lying on a dirt road, one of a group of photographs of the My Lai Massacre shot by Army photographer Ronald Haeberle and published in *Life* magazine. The poster's text, printed in red, "Q: And Babies? A: And Babies," was taken from a "60 Minutes" interview conducted by Mike Wallace with a GI who had participated in the inci-

dent. Initially, Arthur Drexler, head of the Museum of Modern Art's department of architecture and design, and chairman of the museum's ad hoc planning committee preparing a report for the trustees on the future of the museum, assured Petlin and the AWC, according to Grace Glueck, writing in the Jan. 25, 1970, *New York Times*, that "the museum [would] use its resources to publish such a poster and distribute it. . . . Finally assured on Dec. 9 [1969] . . . that the museum was ready to go ahead with the project, the AWC got permission to use the photo,"<sup>8</sup> and, with labor volunteered by the Amalgamated Lithographers Union and paper donated by Peter Brant [the owner of *A.i.A.*'s parent company], began production. But the publishing plan began to unravel:

Drexler and Wilder Green, director of exhibitions at the Museum . . . decided to "touch base" with [MoMA's president] William S. Paley. . . . He said he would present the matter "without prejudice" to the board of trustees at its Jan. 8 [1970] meeting, but he felt he could not commit the museum on any matter not directly related to a specific function of the museum. At 6 P.M. that day, the AWC was informed by phone that the museum could not associate itself officially with the poster.<sup>9</sup>





This page, *La Rue des Juifs*, 1983, oil on canvas, 104¾ by 81 inches.

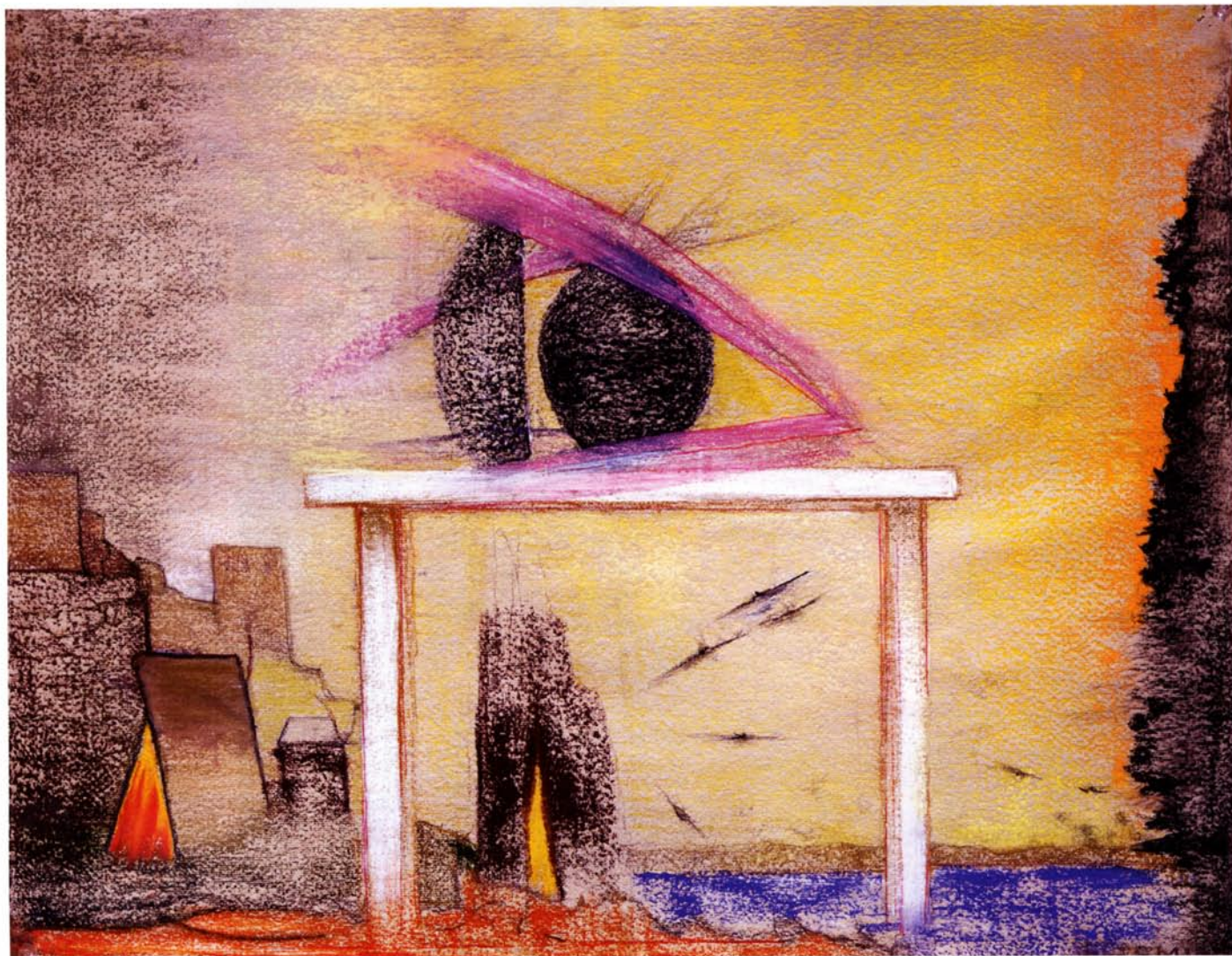
Opposite, *Rubbings from the Calcium Garden . . . Reshoft*, 1969, oil on canvas, 120 by 96 inches.

The AWC reacted; copies of the poster, produced in an edition of 50,000, were handed out in the museum's lobby, and "rites of protest"<sup>10</sup> held in front of Picasso's *Guernica*. The AWC even wrote a letter to Picasso asking him to have *Guernica* removed from the museum's walls. Petlin carried the letter to Paris, but it never reached Picasso.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time that he was engaged in these political activities, Petlin was also making less polemical art. Between 1969 and 1976 he created several series—"The Calcium Garden," "The Semitic Garden" and "The Clay Fountain"—most of the works inhospitable desert land-

scapes of scorched and parched earth emptied of vegetation and devoid of action, though not of figures. Executed in astringent pale yellows and dusty browns, the eight large oils of "The Calcium Garden," each of which took six months to complete, show Petlin finding a visual language to trace his dreams, feelings of foreboding and a sense of the mysterious. He explains:

Often the figures [in these paintings] related to personal losses. But "The Calcium Garden" [series was] really a kind of mourning for the killing fields that Vietnam had become. The calcium garden is simply nature/death—where the bones of thousands, of millions, simply become the landscape.



*Este Mundo*, 2005,  
pastel on paper, 19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> by  
25<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches.

In the 1980s, as he neared his 50s, Petlin turned to the subject of his own Jewish background and to life in the Polish shtetl and ghettos. In *La Rue des Juifs* (1983), the titular street at the center suggests the Warsaw Ghetto and Jewish neighborhoods of Chicago, as well as the endless metaphorical roads in the Jewish diaspora. The street appears again in *Abraham's Wagon* (1984), based on Petlin's vivid memory of his grandfather, who delivered ice and coal in Chicago in a wagon drawn by a white horse, like the conveyance depicted in the painting. Petlin went on to politicize his familial imagery in the painting *The Disappeared* (1985). This is a large oil, similar in composition, but, ominously, the horse and carriage are vanishing into a ghostly forest, and a screaming figure leans on a broken balustrade. The artist told me that this painting was made to decry the "disappearances" of Argentina's Dirty War (1976-83) as well as Henry Kissinger's mid-1970s involvement in Operation Condor, which led to the Argentine atrocities. In these and other works completed in the 1980s, Petlin used a stippled pointillist technique and an incongruously light palette, indicating his continuing interest in Georges Seurat, whose *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte, 1884* (1884-86), hanging prominently at the Art Institute in Chicago, he knew well.

During the same decade, Petlin began an ongoing

series of incisive, medium-size (approximately 39 by 26 inches) charcoal portraits drawn from life of artists and intellectuals who have been important to him, beginning in 1983 with a deeply felt likeness of his friend Meyer Schapiro, the art historian (whom he also depicted in pastel and painting), and continuing with such figures as Keith Waldorp, Leon Golub, Max Kozloff, Jean Clair, Norma Cole, Dominique Fourcade and Michael Palmer. Petlin has said he feels a "jolt of recognition" when reading the works of the authors he portrays, for example, the mystical and visually evocative poetry of Edmond Jabès (1912-1991), a Jewish writer raised in Egypt and expelled during the Suez crisis, whom Petlin knew in Paris. Petlin's portraits of Jabès include a charcoal in which the writer's penetrating eyes, beneath a high forehead, meet the viewer's gaze with astonishing intensity. But the relationship between the work and the author could be more oblique; for example, the paintings in the series "Le Monde d'Edmond Jabès," shown at Galerie Jan Krugier in Geneva in 1997, depict the roofs and misty skies of Paris as seen from the studio Petlin has occupied since 1993.



## PETLIN'S ONGOING SERIES OF PORTRAITS DRAWN FROM LIFE EVIDENCES HIS FAR-FLUNG ACQUAINTANCE WITH WELL-KNOWN WRITERS, ARTISTS AND INTELLECTUALS.

Apart from Jabès, there are three writers in particular, all addressing the Shoah in various ways, who inspired Petlin in the 1990s. In 1990 he exhibited the 21 pastels, each based on a different chemical element, of a series related to *The Periodic Table* (1975) by Primo Levi, the Jewish Italian chemist-turned-writer interred at Auschwitz, who died in 1987. (Petlin was on his way to Turin to create portraits of Levi when he learned of his apparent suicide.) Just as, in the stories of *The Periodic Table*, Levi related the suffering he endured through the metaphor of chemistry, so Petlin's "elements," often showing human figures in desolate landscapes, avoid specificity. Petlin dedicated exhibitions of paintings in 1992 at Krugier in Geneva and at Kent Gallery in New York to the Polish writer, painter and literary critic Bruno Schulz, killed by the Nazis in 1942. Schulz's stories about the village of Drhobycz, where reason and madness are fused, inform Petlin's trembling trees and vulnerable-looking figures. In 1996 and again in 2001, Petlin created paintings in which imaginary Paris streets, closed doors and the Seine river are pervaded by a sense of uncertainty; these were dedicated to the poet Paul Celan (1920-1970) who, like Petlin, worked in sequences, using reiteration to probe his subjects. Petlin and Celan lived and walked in the same section of Paris for many years, but they never met.

Petlin shared with the late artists Leon Golub and Nancy Spero an activist's outlook on art—which is to say, a sense of the ethical responsibility of the artist. In *Infantry: Homage to Leon Golub*, completed in 2005, a year after his friend's death, we see, in three horizontal bands, an imaginary Vietnamese village and European houses in flames (the latter a reference to WWII). On the very bottom are human bones, crossed in the manner of the rifles in the collar insignia of the U.S. Army infantry uniform. Prominent at the lower left is the strong, angry profile of Golub, who raises a fist in protest.

AFTER 9/11, PETLIN GREW INCENSED at what he deemed the criminal conduct of the Bush administration—its lies, torture of prisoners, disregard of the Constitution and destruction of the environment. In 2005, he created a 12-foot-wide triptych, *Entry of Christ into Washington*. Petlin had long been influenced by the work of James Ensor, creating in 1989, for example, *Ensor in Jerusalem*, a painting in which he condemned Israel's destruction of Palestinian villages by showing a crowd of figures escaping from burning fields. He now returned to the Belgian artist, specifically to Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels*

in 1889, a depiction, replete with spatial discontinuities, of a vast, uncontrolled crowd. In his own *Entry*, Petlin intended to draw a parallel between Leopold II, the Belgian king, responsible for the death of millions of Congolese between 1885 and 1908 (though this was not the subject of Ensor's painting), and the American president, presiding over "shock and awe" in Iraq, denoted by flares in the blue-black sky. A distorted Ensor-like depiction of King Leopold appears on the extreme right. Among the recognizable monuments at the left are the Lincoln Memorial and the Capitol, with black birds flying in the sky overhead. American flags and oil derricks are ranged above barely visible masses of people who, pressed into the middle ground, appear to be marching on Washington. In the foreground is a great turmoil: a ghostly ship manned with Arab sheiks and Ku Klux Klansmen drifts along beneath topical words—Yale, GOP, Florida, Abu Ghraib, etc. A pair of black and white vertical stripes at the bottom center signifies the Twin Towers. Like much of Petlin's work, this



*Portrait of Meyer Schapiro*, 1983, oil on canvas, 36 by 30 inches.

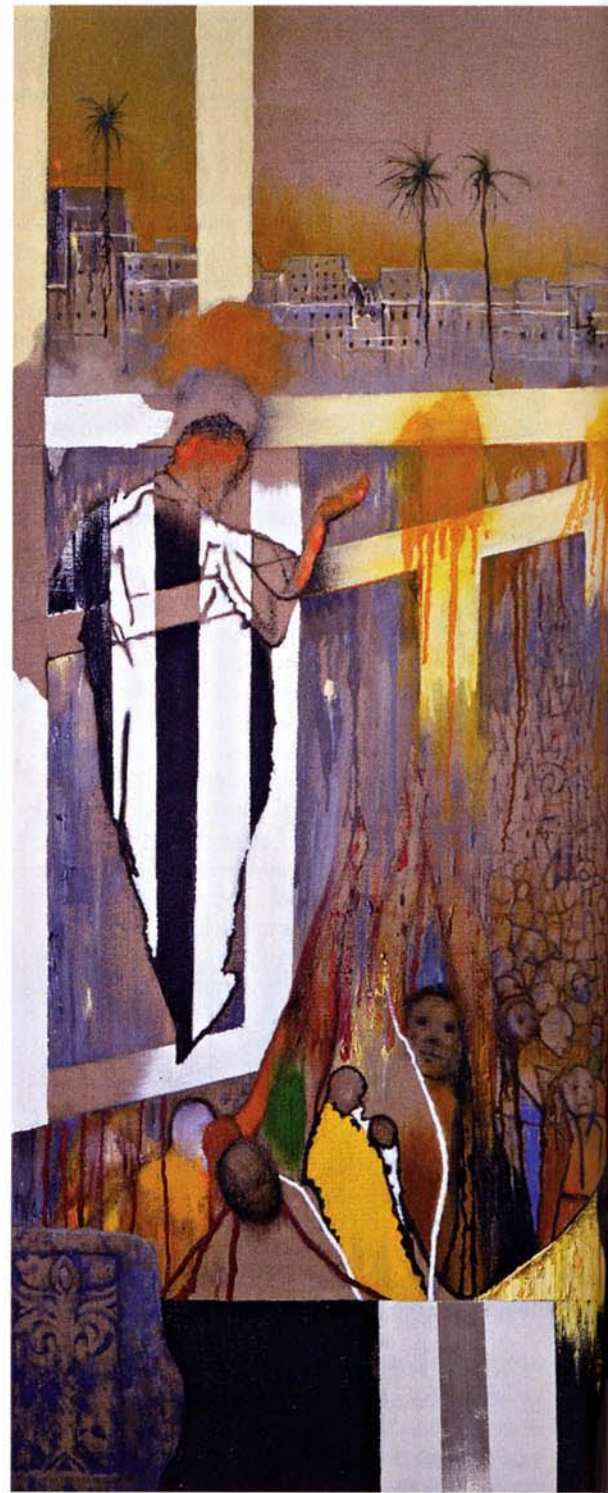
pivotal painting is a narrative of mayhem, without sequence or resolution. He followed up the theme in 2006 with another grand-scale painting currently on view in New York at Richard L. Feigen & Co., the triptych *Este Mundo*, titled for a poem by the U.S. poet Michael Palmer. Commemorating the third anniversary of the launch of the war in Iraq, the picture shows people climbing ladders that rise into a tumultuous night sky.

Violence against Jews has long been a subject in Petlin's work, but, for him, the violence of Jews against Palestinians, and the role of Israel in the troubles of the Middle East, is particularly fraught. In 1999-2001, following the massacre of 29 Muslims at prayer by a Brooklyn-born Jewish extremist in the West Bank city of Hebron, Petlin produced a canvas more than 15 feet wide, called *Hebron*, in which struggling, twisting and dying figures represent the Palestinians in a hospital-like interior. His latest monumental (9-foot-wide)

**1** Jean Dubuffet, quoted in Margit Rowell, "Jean Dubuffet: Art on the Margins of Culture," *Jean Dubuffet: A Retrospective*, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1973, p. 22. **2** Philip Guston, in Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Berkeley, et al., University of California Press, 1976, p. 159. **3** Even before he went to Yale, Petlin had his first show, at Cliff Dwellers Gallery in Chicago in 1956; his first sale was to Sam Koffler and Herman Spertus, who would later found the Spertus Institute in Chicago. **4** Maurice Fabre, "Odilon Redon," *Le Passant*, Feb. 20, 1886, p. 63. (Trans. by author.) **5** Edouard Glissant, introduction to *Petlin: Peintures récentes*, Paris, Galerie du Dragon, 1964, n.p. (Trans. by author.) **6** Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are taken from the author's interviews with the artist, conducted in Berkeley, Calif., Nov. 16 and 27, 2005. **7** For a complete account, see "Irving Petlin with John Yau," *Brooklyn Rail*, Mar. 11, 2006, p. 254. See also di Suvero's account in an interview with Joan Simon, "Urbanist at Large," *Art in America*, November 2005, pp. 163-64. The tower was reconstructed by di Suvero and Rirkrit Tiravanija in consultation with Petlin for the 2005 Whitney Biennial, to draw attention to the parallels between the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. **8** Grace Glueck, "Art Notes: Yanking the Rug from Under," *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 1970, p. 97. The article contains a complete account of the poster's production and the ensuing controversy. **9** *Ibid.* **10** *Ibid.* **11** Petlin writes in an e-mail to the author, dated Oct. 10, 2009: "The AWC letter never reached Picasso because Alfred Barr alerted Michel Leiris and Roland Penrose that I was on my way to France to personally deliver the petition to Picasso. A ruse was then put into play in which I was led to believe that Leiris himself would act as the bearer. . . . In fact this was to guarantee that the petition would never reach Picasso. Ernest Pignon, painter, and Hélène Parmelin, writer and model for Picasso—lifelong, intimate friends of Picasso—confirmed this at a meeting in their atelier, when after phoning and phoning in my presence, they were unable to get through to Picasso himself. It took some serious threats, but eventually Leiris returned the 500+ petitions to me in Paris at a forced meeting in a café almost a full month later."

"Irving Petlin: Major Paintings" is on view at Kent Gallery, New York, Jan. 14-Mar. 27; the gallery has published a catalogue online and posted a brief interview with Petlin filmed in January 2010. "Irving Petlin: A Retrospective" is appearing jointly in New York at Jan Krugier, Feb. 2-Apr. 2, and Richard L. Feigen & Co., Feb. 9-Apr. 16.

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painting, *Gaza/Guernica* (2009), currently on view at Kent Gallery, shows Petlin losing none of his fire on the subject of Israel. Like many of his recent canvases, it features an expansive horizontal composition suggesting a vast space. Standing at the upper left is a Christlike figure draped in black and white bands, acting as witness to unfolding carnage. A fence, referring to the barrier wall the Israelis are building between Israel and the West Bank, stretches across the painting, with a city glimpsed in the



*Gaza/Guernica*, 2009.  
oil on linen, diptych,  
78 by 108 inches.

distance beyond. Two bodies in blazing white shrouds are carried by a massive crowd to the foreground, where a line of blocklike forms refers to the cuneiform tablets excavated in Tel el-Amarna, Egypt, which testify to Gaza's role in ancient Mediterranean trade. Petlin likens the brutal Israeli attacks on Gaza in 2008-09 to the Fascist bombing of Guernica in 1937. And like Picasso, Petlin creates a work that mediates between figuration and abstraction in an expression of deep outrage and grief. ○