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Bold Perceptions in Color

By Peter Plagens

Irving Petlin: Storms (After Redon)

Kent Fine Art

210 Eleventh Avenue, 2nd Floor, www.KentFineArt.net

Through December 21

Irving Petlin (b. 1934) began his artistic career in 1950s Chicago and now divides his time between Paris and New York. He loves to make titular references to the varied likes of Johann Sebastian Bach, Primo Levi and the poet Paul Celan, and to create homages to earlier great artists—in this case, the French Symbolist Odilon Redon. That kind of thing often deadens an artist's work when it seems like intellectual name-dropping and historical show-offishness. But for all his literary predilections, Mr. Petlin is impressively capable of putting together a sensitive, glowing exhibition that gives truth to Hans Hofmann's axiom that, while in nature light makes the color, in painting color makes the light. That is, in a successful modern picture the illuminating whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is particularly true of Mr. Petlin's miraculous pastel drawings on distressed handmade paper, which combine crisply accurate partial outlines of boats and people with chalky skeins of mystical light.

Mr. Petlin not only means his tribute to Redon—an artist he first encountered in high school, an experience he has described as "looking into a pool of water...down towards the bottom [where] you see your own shape"—but he transports the inspiration into scenes as odd as the Titanic being towed to sea in 1912 and the Fukushima nuclear disaster last year. The results are remarkable technical achievements in a notoriously difficult medium. The poetic atmosphere permeating the show, however, elevates it to the realm of—to invoke the art-world word of the moment—amazing. Mr. Petlin's gorgeous show, in other words, amounts to much more than the sum of its beautiful parts.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.