

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950

The Sun

Freilicher and Friends

By XICO GREENWALD, Special to the Sun | April 28, 2013

In the 1950s and 60s, painter Jane Freilicher (b.1924) and her circle of artist and writer friends made breezy works about life in New York and about each other. Cross-pollination and collaboration were part of a creative process where artists wrote poetry and criticism and poets wrote about art and posed for portraits. The work produced by the painters in this group is often overshadowed by the radical developments of Abstract Expressionism and Pop happening at the same time. But a new exhibition at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, *Jane Freilicher: Painter Among Poets*, calls attention to Ms. Freilicher's back and forth with her poet friends during this inspired period.



Jane Freilicher,
'Early New York Evening,' 1954
Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

Tibor de Nagy Gallery supported this close-knit group, giving Freilicher, as well as Grace Hartigan, Larry Rivers and Fairfield Porter their debut solo exhibitions in New York. And Tibor de Nagy Editions was the first to publish poems by Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and James Schuyler. *Jane Freilicher: Painter Among Poets* is displaying 30 paintings and drawings by Freilicher as well as correspondence between Freilicher and her poet friends and illustrated books, all attesting to Freilicher's position as a peer, collaborator and muse.

Many of Freilicher's artworks in the show pay direct tribute to her friends. Portraits and sketches of Kenneth Koch, Ashbery, O'Hara and Schuyler are all on display. But the landscapes and still lifes here are also imbued with poetry. In *Early New York Evening*, 1954, a twilight view of downtown tenement buildings, the dimensions of the canvas are approximately the same as the window frame we look out from. Under a transcendent twilight sky, the cityscape, painted with a straightforward, clunky touch that defies the rules of perspective, has sooty color, with the smokestacks on the horizon exhaling into the night sky.

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Flowers in Armchair, 1956, fills the canvas with an off-center wicker chair. A glass vase on the seat holds pink and white chrysanthemums and a lone, drooping yellow rose, the bouquet bringing the eye to a paisley throw draped over the seatback that dances with patterning. The intimate little scene seems born of a process that flows from seeing to feeling to painting.

A student of Abstract Expressionist Hans Hofmann, Freilicher's feel for color and paint handling is on display in *Cover Crop*, 1963, a luminous Long Island summer landscape combining fresh, light greens, reds and blues with dark drawn strokes to describe delicately colored farmhouses by the water. Another composition that seems to have its origins in abstract color concepts is *Portrait of Kenneth Koch*, c. 1966, a nearly monochromatic study in whites, with the poet in a white shirt against a white, hazy background on the left and a bouquet of white hydrangeas on the right.

The offhanded, intimate approach adopted by Freilicher and some of her fellow painters belies the critically important contributions these artists made to the canon of twentieth century art. One of the works in the show, *Pierrot and Peonies*, 2007, pays tribute to French Rococo painter Antoine Watteau. Watteau's friendships with players from commedia dell'arte informed his work, with troupe members posing in costume for paintings depicting human dramas. In Freilicher's work, too, the artist has gone outside the art world for a creative exchange. Her friendships with New York School poets have deepened her relationship to her surroundings and the paintings here are richer for it.