

The New Criterion

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Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

The challenge of a contextual exhibition such as “Jane Freilicher: Painter Among Poets” is just how the context should inform the art on view. The poets here are the New York School writers John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, and James Schuyler—a circle that included Freilicher as a painter-in-residence starting in the late 1940s. In the case of Ashbery (born in 1927) and Freilicher (born in 1924), surviving members of the circle, this includes a friendship that continues to the present day.

Through correspondence, some of it collected along with books and manuscripts in display cases, we see how much the poets relied on Freilicher’s advice and friendship. O’Hara wrote a series of “Jane poems” with her name woven into the titles. For her part, Freilicher frequently portrayed the writers in her paintings. The exhibition includes her portraits of Ashbery (ca. 1954 and ca. 1968), Koch (ca. 1966), Schuyler (ca. 1965), and O’Hara (ca. 1951 and ca. 1967). (She once wondered if O’Hara’s “attractiveness was one of the reasons so many painters enjoyed knowing him.”)



Jane Freilicher, *Portrait of Kenneth Koch*, c.1966, oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches

No other gallery but Tibor de Nagy could mine this territory so expertly. The gallery mounted its first exhibition of Freilicher’s work in 1952. The gallery’s namesake, along with John Myers, De Nagy’s gallery partner from 1951 to 1970, was part of this same large circle of painters and poets. The exhibition also includes a hundred-page catalogue with an extensive essay by Jenni Quilter, an academic who has focused on the New York School poets and their connections with visual artists.

The exhibition steers clear of drawing too easy a connection between the visual and written work. “My poet friends didn’t influence me directly,” Freilicher explains through the catalogue. She “followed her own path,” says Ashbery, “with stops along the way to take in Bonnard, Balthus, Watteau, and even, unless I’m mistaken, Hofmann himself.” “Like a shout across a body of water,” writes Quilter, “we cannot trace these echoes back to their source, and nor would we really want to.”

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950

The cross-connections are more about tone than substance. Freilicher identifies a shared “sympathetic vibration, a natural syntax—a lack of pomposity or heavy symbolism—and something to do with intimism, an intimate kind of expression.” Quilter writes of their “gracious existence composed of the pleasures of the good life: beautiful things, fine food, excellent company.”

This lightness and intimacy that Freilicher brought to the circle becomes clear early on. Her appearance in two sketch comedies filmed by Rudy Burckhardt in the early 1950s, screened in the gallery’s back room, demonstrates how, as a serious artist, she still never took herself too seriously. Her style was clearly different from New York’s hardboiled abstract painters of the 1940s; such machismo, she said, was “not terribly interesting” to her. Reviewing her 1952 exhibition at Tibor de Nagy, Fairfield Porter wrote how Freilicher was “trying to rediscover first principles. Her painting is traditional and radical.”

In her intimate work, Freilicher was unafraid of small statements. “A can of coffee, a 35¢ ear/ ring, a handful of hair, what/ do these things do to us?” wrote O’Hara in his “Interior (with Jane)” in 1951. Freilicher’s paintings have always “lacked that authoritarian look, public-spirited and public-addressed, stamped on so much postwar work like a purple ‘OK to Eat’ on a rump of beef,” Schuyler colorfully concluded. Instead, Freilicher finds greatness in vignettes—in Long Island landscapes, and in glimpses from her studio overlooking the rooftops around New York’s Union Square. As the window on a circle of poets, she also offers a view that is equally inviting.



Jane Freilicher, *Study in Blue and Gray*, 2011, oil on linen, 24 x 24 inches

“Jane Freilicher: Painter Among Poets” opened at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, on April 13 and remains on view through June 14, 2013.

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