

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950

The New York Times

BIG CITY

A Painter Amid Friends

By GINIA BELLAFANTE
Published: May 25, 2013

In the summer of 1949, John Ashbery, unleashed to the world from Harvard, arrived in New York to begin his long and productive creative life in a small loft building on Third Avenue near 16th Street. Mr. Ashbery was to spend the season in the apartment of his college friend Kenneth Koch, who was visiting his parents in

Cincinnati, and he was to pick up the key from a woman, Jane Freilicher, who lived one floor up. The consequence of this quotidian exchange was a deeply connected friendship now in its sixth decade, nourished by the bohemian reverie that characterized Greenwich Village for so much of the 20th century and migrated to the east end of Long Island with the arrival of Memorial Day. This relationship, and the others that grew from it, are the subject of "Jane Freilicher: Painter Among Poets," an exhibition at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in Midtown, a show that places Ms. Freilicher's work in the context of her exalted status among the poets of the New York School — Mr. Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler — to whom she was muse, confidante, beloved brain. "One doesn't stay friends with somebody for 40 years unless they have a lot of nice qualities, such as brilliance," Mr. Ashbery wrote two decades ago. "Jane Freilicher is also the wittiest person I have ever known."

By implication, the show is an exercise in anthropology as well, an exploration of an ever-receding way of social life among successful creative people in the city, one in which the friendships built and circles configured seemed more firmly rooted in genuine affection, in affinity, in shared notions of whimsy, than in the prospect of mutual professional advantage.



Jane Freilicher, 88, who was part of a postwar bohemian circle in Greenwich Village, at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

724 Fifth Avenue New York NY 10019

212 262 5050 212 262 1841 fax info@tibordenagy.com tibordenagy.com

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950

This is a view at once surely too cynical and too naïve, and yet it is an impression that is hard to shake from a glimpse into Ms. Freilicher's enviable world. The painter, now 88, and her friends — among them also, the artists Grace Hartigan, Fairfield Porter, Larry Rivers — spent an enormous amount of time in one another's company and a great deal of energy communicating with one another when they were not. A 1956 letter written by Ms. Freilicher to Frank O'Hara, who celebrated her in his acclaimed "Jane" poems, initiated various plans to get together, beginning: "Dear Frankie, I was utterly delighted to get your cuddlesome letter. Perhaps you don't know how much I'm missing you but it is quite a terrible lot. It is a terrible thing being the Adlai Stevenson of the art world without a Young Democrat like you by my side."

It is very hard to imagine an artist like Rachel Feinstein today coming forth, from her lavishly appointed home, with a similarly toned (similarly adorable) e-mail to her friends Tom Ford or Marc Jacobs (and not just because she is a Republican who has decried the left). Noting the shift to our modern corporate art world, observers often mourn the lost chaos of a previous time, but it seems equally worth mourning a lost sincerity, the premium placed on companionship.

Ms. Freilicher, a student of Hans Hofmann's, came of age as a painter during the high moment of the Abstract Expressionists, but she forged a visual language that was very different, creating loosely figurative paintings that were quieter, more domestic, absent the sense of combat. The show at Tibor de Nagy is, among other things, a fitting augury of summer. Much of Ms. Freilicher's work depicts the pastoral world beyond the window of her Long Island summer house on Mecox Bay in Water Mill, which she and her husband Joe Hazan began building in 1960, five years before she gave birth to their only child, Elizabeth, at age 41.

East Hampton had the madness of the art world then, but also the comparative languor, which is what Ms. Freilicher, who never achieved the sweeping fame of her contemporaries despite her renown in her own universe, chose to capture. But the extremism of the era touched her, too. A portrait by Fairfield Porter of Larry Rivers depicts its subject in wrist bandages. As the story goes, Mr. Rivers was moved to cut himself when he learned, in the '50s, that Ms. Freilicher was going to marry. "He was a skirt chaser, among other things," Ms. Freilicher said, laughing off the episode recently, refusing to imbue it with the self-importance others might have.

It is fashionable now to carry a nostalgia for the New York of the 1970s, but in those years, it was the way of the artistic to lament the disappearance of the '50s. In a 1979 story for New York magazine, Larry Rivers suggested that the art world lost its purity when its marriage to the poets, whose work was not easily made into a commodity, wound down.

I asked Ms. Freilicher, who still paints from her apartment and studio on lower Fifth Avenue, if she was soon headed to another summer on Long Island. She was not sure. There were so few friends left.