

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

The Wonderful World of Rudy Burckhardt

John Yau | December 28, 2014



Rudy Burckhardt, "Purple Band" (1964), oil on board, 9 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches

When it comes to the artistic community of New York City, especially from the late-1930s to the end of the 20th century, I can think of many writers, photographers, and artists who readily qualify as *flâneurs*, but there is only who matched Charles Baudelaire's description of the "passionate spectator," someone who could be called "a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life."



Rudy Burckhardt, "Flat Iron Building, Winter" (1947/48) (vintage), gelatin-silver print, 7 1/4 x 8 1/8 inches

In his films and photographs, Rudy Burckhardt captured the "flickering grace" of New York, particularly in the resolute movement and idle hanging out of its citizens. However, in contrast to Baudelaire's mordant wit, Burckhardt imbued his work with an infectious innocence and gentle delight that, paradoxically, also infuses it with a quiet melancholy and gravity that is not immediately apparent.

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950

If, like me, you are at all curious about how different the landscape of New York, as well as its inhabitants in their fashions and tastes, look since the 20th century ended, then you should make your way to *Rudy Burckhardt: Subterranean Monuments: Photographs, Paintings and Films: A Centenary Celebration* at Tibor de Nagy (November 29, 2014–January 17, 2015). Burckhardt, who was never interested in focusing on his career, worked across different mediums long before it became fashionable. In addition to a selection of his photographs, paintings and films, this exhibition includes books, collage postcards, a typed poem and two paintings done on mushrooms.

Aside from the films, the exhibition concentrates largely on two genres, still-life and landscape, whether of the city or of the woods near his house in Maine, where he went each summer from 1956 to 1999, the year that he died. Many of the views tend to be either close-ups of storefronts or trees, or vistas looking out over rooftops, as if the city were a mountainous landscape, which it is. The few exceptions, such as the black-and-white photograph, “Crossing” (1948), in which we see a row of people crossing the street in the foreground, with a cavern of tall buildings serving as a backdrop, hint at the range of what caught his eye. In this photograph, one is likely to recall the oft-quoted lines from William Shakespeare’s comedy, *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances ...” As evidenced in the early film, “The Climate of New York” (1935), which is being shown along with other films, Burckhardt is empathetic to human purposefulness and vanity, from striding pedestrians to children digging in the mud with sticks and two women of different proportions comparing their new hairdos.



Rudy Burckhardt, “38th Street South” (1987),
oil on linen, 38 x 32 inches

In all of the work, one senses Burckhardt’s interest in the chaotic order of everyday life and throwaway things. Although he is never emphatic, one senses his melancholic awareness of just how fleeting and enchanting, everything is. There is an emotional depth and complexity to the work that we have yet to fully plumb, perhaps because what comes across first is Burckhardt’s droll humor.

Burckhardt was born in Basel, Switzerland, in 1914. He went to London to study medicine, but gave it up when he discovered photography. He came to New York in 1935 with the poet Edwin Denby, who went on to become a great and influential dance critic. Both Denby and Burckhardt were interested in movement, but for very different reasons. Denby was interested in the gymnastic beauty a dancer could achieve, while Burckhardt was inspired by people going determinedly to and fro, as if something great awaited their arrival.



Rudy Burckhardt, "Ant" (1996), oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

Although Burckhardt studied painting briefly with Amédée Ozenfant, he rightfully considered himself a primitive. In his essay, "How I Think I Made Some of My Photos and Paintings," he describes a primitive painting: A painting done without much skill; the finished picture is visualized beforehand, and the subject is more important than how it is painted, brought to a degree of completion, clear without ambiguity, without loose ends, as if it were the only painting ever made, outside of trends or history.

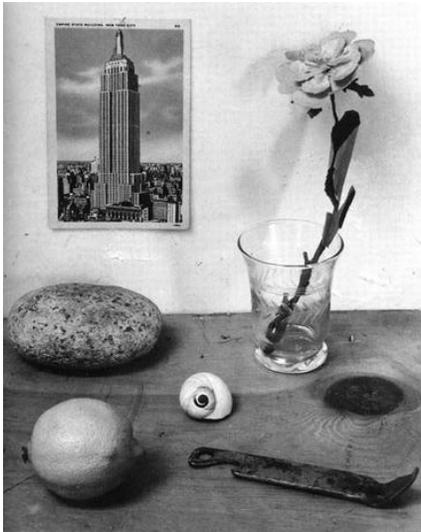
This is the conundrum that animates all of Burckhardt's work. Born into a well-to-do Swiss family, he received a classical education that included, as he said, 'many years of Latin and Greek.' As an artist, he is self-taught and at home in different mediums. He made crisp, sharply focused, close-up photographs of storefronts and newsstands, because that is what the subject demanded, while in his views from rooftops, he was as sensitive to the city's haze and air as to the buildings in the distance. In the paintings done in Maine, he often focused on the bark of a tree and the lichen growing on it. Whatever he looked at became a subject of intense and loving scrutiny. In addition to close-ups and long views, he would juxtapose the two in a single photograph or painting without making the image seem contrived.

In the photograph "Willem de Kooning Studio I" (1950), the view is of a cabinet whose top is cluttered with coffee cans for soaking brushes in turpentine, cans of paint and paintbrushes by a window, where, across the street, a man and woman are walking in opposite directions.



Rudy Burckhardt, "Willem de Kooning Studio I" (1950), gelatin-silver print, 7 x 8 inches

In the still-life painting “Purple Band” (1946), Burckhardt has arranged a nail, a bolt, a striped bowl, a snail shell and a tourist replica of the Statue of Liberty on a table with a prominent knothole. A pair of pliers stands upright on the table, resting against the dirty plaster wall right behind the table, beside a colored postcard of an ocean liner with three smoke stacks, and on the far right, a nail hole. Everything in the painting is given its own space, and one senses from the postcard and Statue of Liberty replica that there is an autobiographical current running through his choices.



Rudy Burckhardt, “Snail and Can Opener”
(1950), gelatin-silver print, 7 x 8 inches

In “38th Street South” (1987), done more than forty years after “Purple Band,” he is still a primitive paying close attention to what is in front of him. The painting is an aerial view of a gray, nondescript office building seen in the distance, wedged in by other buildings. It is the homeliest of the bunch, which is perhaps why Burckhardt gave it so much space in the painting. Within the grid of windows, he has been attentive to the overhead yellow fluorescent lights glowing in each little rectangle, each pair of them depicted at a slightly different angle. In his attention to such details, one senses that nothing else existed during the time he worked on this painting but the inconsequential things he was looking at.

Burckhardt wasn’t interested in the decisive moment or in overt social commentary. And yet, I would not call him an aesthete either. As someone who has passed the iconic New York building known as the Flat Iron countless times, and seen innumerable people photographing it, Burckhardt’s vintage photograph, “Flat Iron Building, Winter” (1947/48) presents a view that remains fresh. Seen from the air, it also underscores the resolve of New York real estate moguls to buy and build on whatever plot of land is available, including a triangular block bordered by the crisscrossing of Broadway and Fifth Avenue. It is when you get a sense of how narrow the building is — and this is because Burckhardt shows just the building’s prow-like front and the Broadway side that you realize how a combination of greed, ingenuity and vision (in this case, that of the architect Daniel Burnham) can result in something magical.

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Installation view at Rudy Burckhardt exhibition

For me, one of the revelations of the exhibition was the inclusion of Burckhardt's painted mushrooms, including a self-portrait, as well as collage postcards and a typed poem, which are indicative of how many different things he did throughout his life. In this museum-quality exhibition, it is quickly apparent that Burckhardt is essentially uncategorizable. To say that he is a photographer, filmmaker and painter seems almost meaningless because the work does and, more importantly, doesn't fit together. What about the collages or the poem? Are there more of them? What are they like? What about a complete volume of his writings?

In the photograph, "Snail and Can Opener," (1945), while looking at the way Burckhardt places a snail shell, its eye-like form, in the center of the objects he has arranged on table top, with a postcard of the Empire State Building on the wall behind, I was reminded of what Baudelaire wrote about "the perfect *flaneur*." "[T]o see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world ..."