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Rudy Burckhardt: ‘Subterranean Monuments: A Centenary Celebration’

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Rarer than the artist's artist is the poet's artist, and Rudy Burckhardt was one. Born in Switzerland in 1914 into a family of scholars and businessmen, he picked up photography early and, after meeting the American poet and critic Edwin Denby, came to New York in 1935. Creating art and living in an aesthetic milieu seemed, initially at least, to have about equal weight for him. Mr. Burckhardt tended to speak of himself as a committed amateur in the sense of being someone who does what he does for love, not glory or pay. In his case, that love embraced several mediums, all represented in a small museum-ready survey called “Rudy Burckhardt: Subterranean Monuments: A Centenary Celebration” at Tibor de Nagy.

Rudy Burckhardt's “Bird's Eye Still Life,” a 1945 photograph.
Credit 2015 Estate of Rudy Burckhardt/Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York; Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

In downtown Manhattan, which became his primary home for five decades, he was best known as a photographer to the artists and writers who became close to him, a multigenerational group that ranged from Willem de Kooning to the painter Yvonne Jacquette (Mr. Burckhardt's second wife) and included John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch and Vincent Katz. Mr. Burckhardt painted portraits of many of them; that's what a 1950 shot of Mr. de Kooning's studio basically is. But the city itself was his great subject, often viewed from a great height or up from a pigeon's-eye perspective on the street. His pictures of Manhattan in the 1940s are distinctive. He made the city look at once effervescent and evanescent, a grand, rambling, energy-spitting machine dissolving into dust.

For most of a career that Mr. Burckhardt was reluctant to call a career, he was also a filmmaker. To many admirers, his hundreds of films, many shorts, are his most original work. The show has just four (others are on DVD), from a jazzy 22-minute montage of city scenes to a six-minute tracking shot of a caterpillar's progress, like animated Zen calligraphy, along a branch. Far less familiar are his modest-size paintings of urban vistas, studio still lifes and nature studies — close-ups of ferns, flowers and tree bark — done outdoors in Maine, where he spent his last years and where he died, a suicide, in 1999. Each nature painting is meticulously observed, transcendently imperfect.



“Purple Band,” a Burckhardt painting from 1946. Credit 2015 Estate of Rudy Burckhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

The gallery intermixes all of this material, a good idea. We see geometric forms repeated over time and media — a manhole cover in a photo, circular patterns of tree lichens in a painting — suggesting a consistent formal focus. And we get a sense of compositional rigor, with image after image as self-contained, balanced and resonant as a sonnet. Such subtleties are not big selling points in American art. They have long made Mr. Burckhardt, with his avid fan base and mainstream obscurity, the “subterranean monument” of the show’s title. The phrase, by the way, is Mr. Ashbery’s description of Mr. Burckhardt, the words of a poet-artist describing an artist-poet who was also a cherished friend.