

TIBOR DE NAGY

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HYPERALLERGIC

The Reluctant Genius of Rudy Burckhardt

The complexity of Burckhardt's work is easy to overlook, because he calls attention to neither his mastery nor his labor.

By John Yau

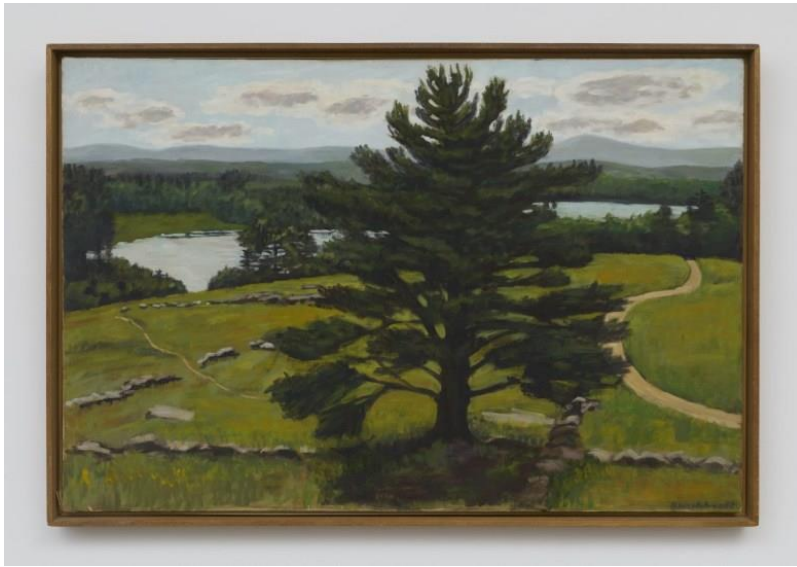


Rudy Burckhardt. "Sixth Avenue" (1977), oil on linen (all images courtesy Estate of Rudy Burckhardt and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York)

Two decades have passed since the last exhibition devoted solely to the paintings of Rudy Burckhardt. Never one to toot his own horn, Burckhardt was a polymath whom the poet John Ashbery characterized as “unsung for so long that he is practically a subterranean monument.” The paintings are just one part of his diverse oeuvre, which also includes photographs, films, and the autobiography *Mobile Homes* (1979). Within each of these mediums, he explored multiple avenues. It is this multiplicity that makes him both memorable and elusive and why [Rudy Burckhardt: A Painting Exhibition](#) at Tibor de Nagy Gallery is a must-see event. Through his directness, modesty, and scrupulous attention to detail, the artist's representation of the oddness of the ordinary is unrivaled.

The exhibition is comprised of 16 paintings — mostly Maine landscapes (1972–97) and New York cityscapes (1970–87), as well as a 1947 self-portrait and a 1968 still-life — accompanied by a group of paintings done on large dried, perennial mushrooms, arranged on a table. It's works like these that have thrown people off when encountering

Burckhardt's art. He was a serious artist who never took himself too seriously. He painted manhole covers and lichen clinging to trees, things everybody saw but never stopped to look at closely, much less paint.



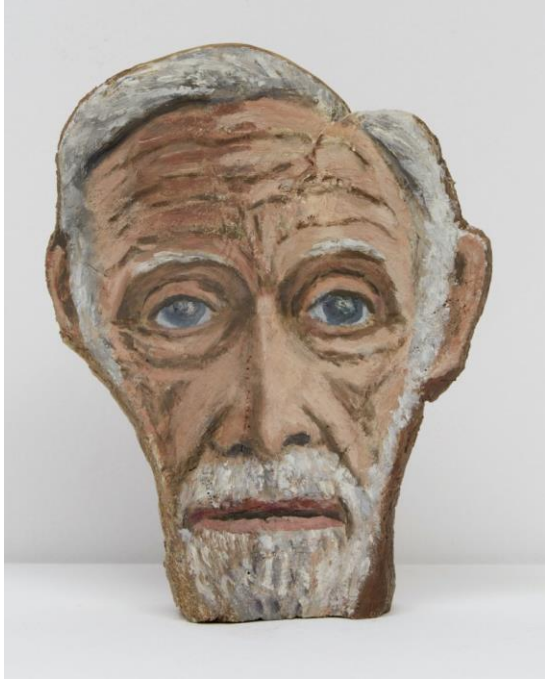
Rudy Burckhardt, "Pond #1" (c. 1970), oil on canvas

In the undated "Pond #1," Burckhardt depicts a fir tree on a horizontal canvas, defying the convention that it should be on a vertical support. A large pond stretches across the upper half of the picture plane, trees and hills beyond it, cloud-studded sky above. The tree is in the foreground on a gently sloping field demarcated by low stone walls. Nothing about it appears heroic. It stands slightly off center and alone, overlooking the pond. This is how I think Burckhardt saw the world, with an innocent, egoless eye, as interested in the details as in the entire view. He liked to see from a distance, as a flaneur walking in crowds, looking down at feet and from rooftops, surveying the entire scene, including each brick in the wall. His meticulous attention to detail never calls attention to itself — he was too modest for that.

"29th Street Panorama" (1979) showcases Burckhardt's mastery at joining two views replete with details, here, a broad city view and a close-up of a brick wall. The eye is constantly refocusing, moving in and out, and yet the painting never dissipates into its plethora of particularities; multiple things within the visual field can serve as focal points. In a brick building to the right of a gray one, we can see into the large windows; the overhead rows of fluorescent tubes remind us that the city is full of people we never see.

Burckhardt portrays an unpeopled view of the city, yet through his attention to each brick and fluorescent light, he honors different forms of human concentration. This is one of the conceptual through lines connecting his paintings, photographs, and films. He is celebrating human activity, whether walking in an empty forest or among pedestrians, standing on a rooftop, or looking at the lichen on a tree. Nothing was without importance. Even though he photographically chronicled the Abstract Expressionists, particularly Willem de Kooning, at a time when artists were touted as heroic, he showed a softer, more

vulnerable side of what art could be. In this and other ways, he was an outlier in the art world.



Rudy Burckhardt, "Edwin" (c. 1975), oil on mushroom

His outlier status becomes all the more evident when looking at the mushroom paintings, which are captivatingly weird, even though the subjects are straightforward — self-portraits, portraits (including part of his wife, artist Yvonne Jacquette's, face), rooftops, and landscapes. The paint handling can be blunt and awkward, and, like a watercolor on paper, nothing can be scraped away or altered after it is put down. In "Edwin" (c. 1975), the face of his longtime friend, the poet Edwin Denby, and the mushroom's shape are identical. While the cycle of birth, death, decay, transformation, and rebirth was likely not on Burckhardt's mind, I could not help but make the connection, while also sensing his droll humor. In Burckhardt's work, one thing leads to another, and the interconnectedness of all things slowly reveals itself.

In his essay "How I Think I Made Some of My Photos and Paintings," he explains:

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.

The complexity of his work is easy to overlook, because he calls attention to neither his mastery nor his labor. He was a modest polymath who loved being alive and in the world. With no trace of nostalgia, he looked at his surroundings carefully and tenderly.



Rudy Burckhardt, "Lichen Tree" (1996), oil on canvas

[Rudy Burckhardt: A Painting Exhibition](#) continues at *Tibor de Nagy Gallery* (11 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through March 8. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.