



MERCEDES MATTER

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Drawings

May 29 through July 13, 1996

**NEW YORK STUDIO SCHOOL
OF DRAWING, PAINTING AND SCULPTURE**

Foreword

by Graham Nickson, Dean

A memory. There were only two visitors left in the Pierre Matisse Gallery; both were eagerly scrutinizing work of a legendary, yet rarely seen artist whose first major show in years had just materialized. It was a first significant exhibition of a painter who had worked for decades, had influenced many and nourished even more, especially younger artists. The exhibitor was a sturdy presence in reality and imagination, even though few knew his work. Curiously, the woman across the room, with an aura of serious looking about her, searching hungrily for an appraisal of the work, could have been described exactly the same way.

Mercedes Matter's art is mature art. It has been made by a mature painter. A lifetime of experiences has informed it. Giant shadows have touched it and been touched by it. Carles, Léger, Hofmann, Giacometti, de Kooning amongst the many.

Mercedes Matter's commitment to painting is total. She exudes passion about that endeavor. She has that awful, wonderful itch that defines a real artist. She has scratched that obsession in many different ways: through her own work, her paintings and drawings painfully realized in front of nature; in the education of the artist, having founded the New York Studio School as a living model of exemplary study. She is constantly engaged in a total immersion of art experiences. She is never more animated and alive than in the company of fellow artists vigorously discussing issues about art. She can talk about, write and see with clarity other art that informs her own. She has a real presence.

True of many significant practitioners of painting, colour and drawing thrive together as a vital presence and conflict in her work. They are in rhythm with her own special quest, making visible the intelligibility of the experience, converted into pictorial metaphor, or, just trying to get it right.

Drawings of Mercedes Matter

by Louis Finkelstein

Most drawings are, in one way or another, subordinate to the art of painting. Often they are preparatory, either as sketches which gather information or as preliminary studies for a more complete work. As such they are valued because they provide intimate insights into an artist's creative processes. The wonderful *sinopie*, the underdrawings of Gothic and early Renaissance frescoes which have come to light by damage to the upper layers seem to us more modern and personal than the final results. Sometimes drawings are preparatory in another sense, namely in developing habits of pictorial analysis and eye and hand coordination, and in leading to the appreciation of pictorial ideals and possibilities. Even the very finished presentation drawings of High Renaissance artists such as Paolo Veronese, or the many beautifully complete drawings that Van Gogh executed after his paintings depend on processes and considerations other than those of drawing itself.

Although Mercedes Matter's overall production includes many drawings of the sketch variety from both landscape and the human figure her large charcoal drawings stand alone as an entirely different art form even though they are done with what are commonly thought of as drawing materials and methods.

Paintings are considered more complete than drawings largely because of the greater concreteness and physicality of color and paint, and because the longer time usually involved in their execution makes them seem more conclusive. Neither consideration obtains for the works in question. For them, by contrast, the *subtraction* of color is a positive feature. Instead of a passive imitation of surface continuity the marks leave something for the imagination to fill in, namely the discrete mental decisions of selecting, placing and relating. These are only undertaken on the basis of looking at the setups, the arrangements of objects: flowers, vases, skulls, plaster casts and draperies which are their source. So that the analysis of appearance is very much at issue, but this is continually in tension with what emerges synthetically in the construction of relationships on the surface of the panel. The working process goes on for weeks and months, involving a multitude of adjustments, editings, second thoughts, leading to the integration of many "takes" as to the meanings implicit in the forms and their relationships.

Analysis and, subsequent synthesis constitute the prime content of these drawings. The setups from which they are drawn are themselves the products of thoughtful planning; they are "foreprojects," intentions directed towards future discoveries. Their arrangement states themes: of radiation from, or circulation about a center, or of unequal thrusts into space, or the balance and imbalance of small and large,

of a container and a thing contained, of rhythms which unite and rhythms which are broken. Then the establishment of a particular point of view gives to these general proposals a more rigorous specification. The coherence of what physically exists with the sense of sight of the viewer, what in landscape we would call a "scene" is what stamps the relation as a *motif*, the meeting of an inner feeling of meaningfulness with the world of separate facts. In turn this is given particularity by the way the separate elements and their local physical characteristics participate in and modify the sense of the whole. Thus the entering thematic material is transformed by the creation of apparently autonomous, self-subsistent relationships of the drawn marks on the panel, which are themselves generative of new feelings and attitudes as the process unfolds. Each increment precipitates a re-estimate of the thematization of the whole. That is why they are done with charcoal, which admits of endless and spontaneous revision, on the backed-up rugged surface of canvas which can stand up under the process. The marks establish relations, interval, measurement, but that is not all; they also give a physical intentionality to the forms which is more truly kinesthetic and tactile than optical. They connect to the physical body of the perceiver.

The unity of the composition emerges, sometimes in unanticipated ways, because the meaning is read into the actual configuration and not simply its attempt, as the discovered mutuality of such intentions. The capacity to feel coherence, consequence and cogency derives from the distinctively human endowment which disposes us to constitute and process internal images which are not specifically verbal, visual, kinesthetic, somatic, aural, etc., but all of these together and what lies behind them. These images are the medium through which we feel the *qualia*, the specific character of our feelings. Like all mature works of art these drawings are formed by complex internalization: an inner law, as it were, projected out on to the matter at hand, aiming at imposing itself as we view them on our own processes of internalizing. This takes place when our own spectation is appropriately analytical and empathetic, dwelling on, and assimilating the role, the leverage which each element exercises on the whole. The intensity, the probity, the questioning and the contemplatedness with which they were done is what gives them their power, beauty and wholeness.

Mercedes Matter

Autobiography

My career was determined at the age of six when my father, Arthur B. Carles, bought me a small paint-box and took me out into the French countryside to paint by his side.

At the age of 12, I returned to Europe and lived in Italy for two and a half years. During a summer in Venice, I fell in love with Giovanni Bellini, drawing innumerable madonnas when not painting Venetian cityscapes. A time in Assisi, the discovery of Giotto and Cimabue was also important as were Rome and Florence. Those years were my primary education in art history.

At Bennett Junior College in Millbrook I studied sculpture with Lu Duple and during vacation joined the first art class in New York under Maurice Sterne. In the summer of 1932 I studied with Alexander Archipenko.

The following fall I joined the class of Hans Hofmann at the Art Students League and studied with him off and on until 1935. He brought the consciousness and excitement of the Paris avant-garde to a New York where many young artists were avidly hungry for what he had to give. Although I never studied formally with my father, what I learned from Hofmann made me better understand my father's criticisms of my work and his conversations about art.

Thanks to the W.P.A. I had the opportunity to paint for several years without having to get a job. On the mural project under the administration of Burgoyne Diller I had the chance to work with Fernand Léger on a projected mural for the French Line. Later I worked with him again privately on another projected mural. I was an original member of the American Abstract Artists with which I showed annually.

In 1938, through Léger, I met my husband, photographer Herbert Matter.

The following years, as a result of the war, were very lively in New York because of the influx of European artists. Contact with them was important to me and for a year Léger shared our apartment and studio.

In 1943 we moved to California, where raising my infant son under difficult wartime circumstances curtailed my work.

Back in New York in 1946, I found my friends again and a climate that was intensely stirring. De Kooning's *Attic* at the Whitney Museum had a profound impact.

During the next ten years I showed in various group shows including the annual Stable Gallery exhibitions.

The Artists' Club was formed in which I was the one female original member in a very male dominated situation. However, the Club became a most unique and wonderful thing including artists of the widest divergence from Edwin Dickinson to Philip Guston, Bradley Tomlin to Joan Mitchell, with the composers and writers as much a part. The Cedar Bar during those years was perhaps the best part of my education. As de Kooning said, "Art is something you can't talk about and you talk about forever."

I always worked long on my paintings - months, sometimes years - and often pushed them beyond their high point into total destruction. Although I feel this took me further than if I had stopped short, it was not helpful toward productivity. When, in the fifties, Leo Castelli offered me a show, I did not feel ready. Later his gallery defined itself in a direction very alien to mine.

In 1956 I had a one-person show at the Tanager Gallery and showed there in group shows.

In 1953 I started teaching at the Philadelphia College of Art (now called the University of the Arts) where I taught for twelve years, and then at Pratt Institute for ten, also for several years at N.Y.U. I was a visiting critic at Antioch, Brandeis, Cincinatti School of Art, Kansas City Art Institute, Maryland Institute, Yale University, Skowhegan and American University in Washington.

In 1963 I wrote an article for *ARTnews* scathingly critical of art education in America as I had experienced it. The idea in writing about it was to get the problem off of my mind instead of which it involved me in something that had a decisive effect on my life. Inspired by my article, my students at Pratt joined by some from Philadelphia, asked me to help them make a real art school, a genuine situation in which they could actually work all day every day, and where they could study with authentic artists. I agreed, so we made the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture.

Although the faculty of the School was always diverse, there was an accord as to basic premises and processes of study from perception. There was compensation for the toll the School took on my life in that it embodied my beliefs and because it played a role in a New York where the art world was becoming more and more dominated by trendiness and commercial concerns.

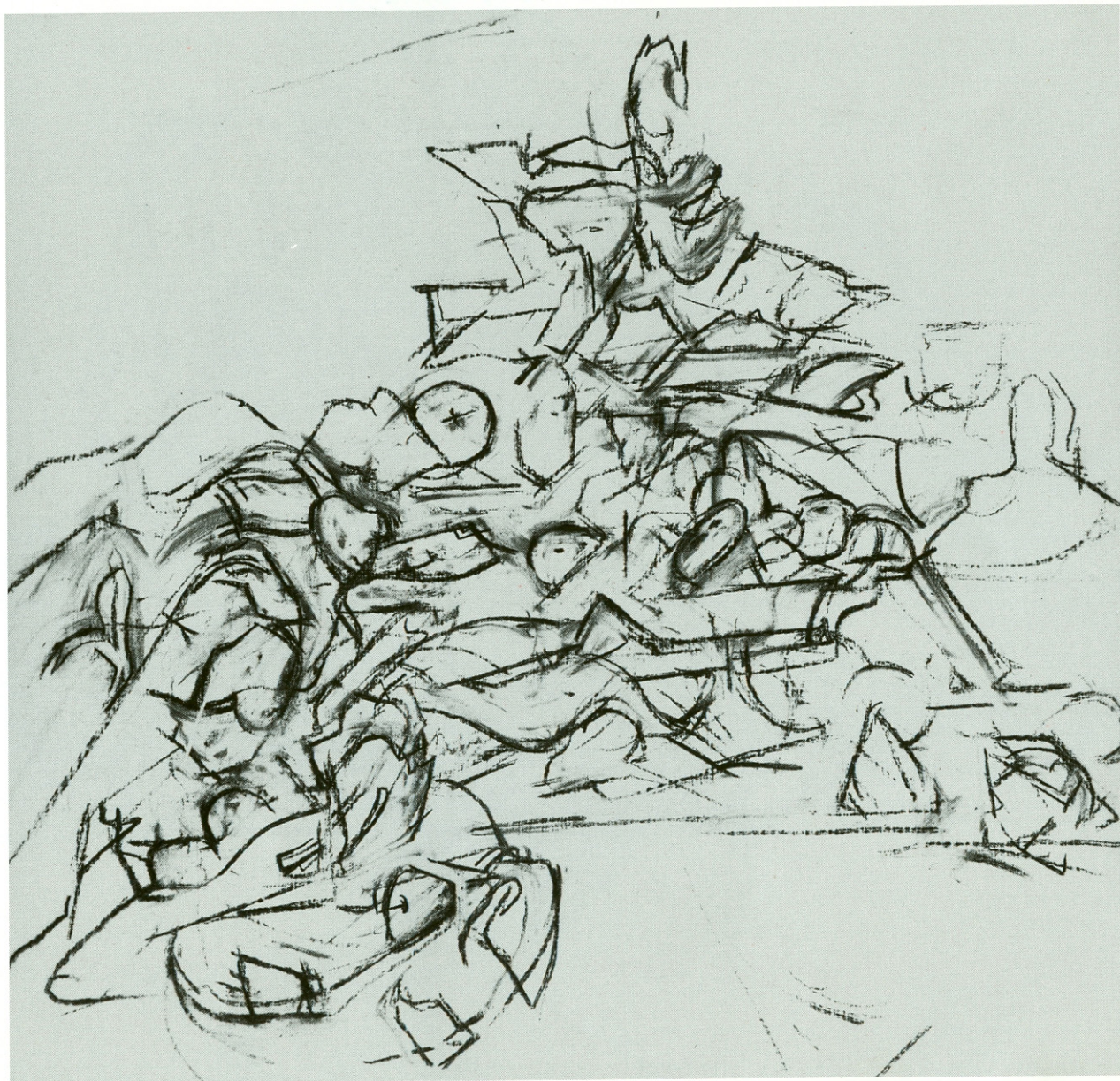
The first 15 years when I devoted much time and energy to the School — first as founder and chairman of faculty, then as dean — were nevertheless important years in the development of my work. In the late seventies I started making my large drawings in charcoal on canvas, on which I work for long periods, so that they become major works. During these years I used all the time I had for my work, giving little thought to matters of career.

In 1979, I suffered a serious illness after which my husband became terminally ill. We had moved to Long Island. He had designed a house with two studios and a living space, but he never got to use his. He died in 1984. The only way I could cope with his death was to immerse myself in an intense period of work which became a sort of harvest of all the years of effort.

That brings me more or less up to the present. I live in East Hampton the year around. Every other week I teach at the Studio School and remain much involved in its development. Otherwise there is my work.



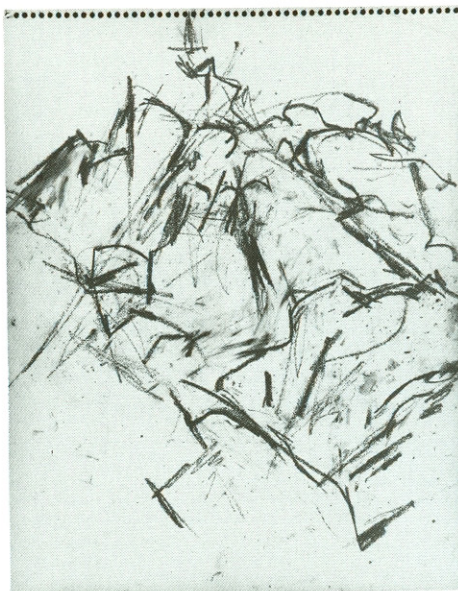








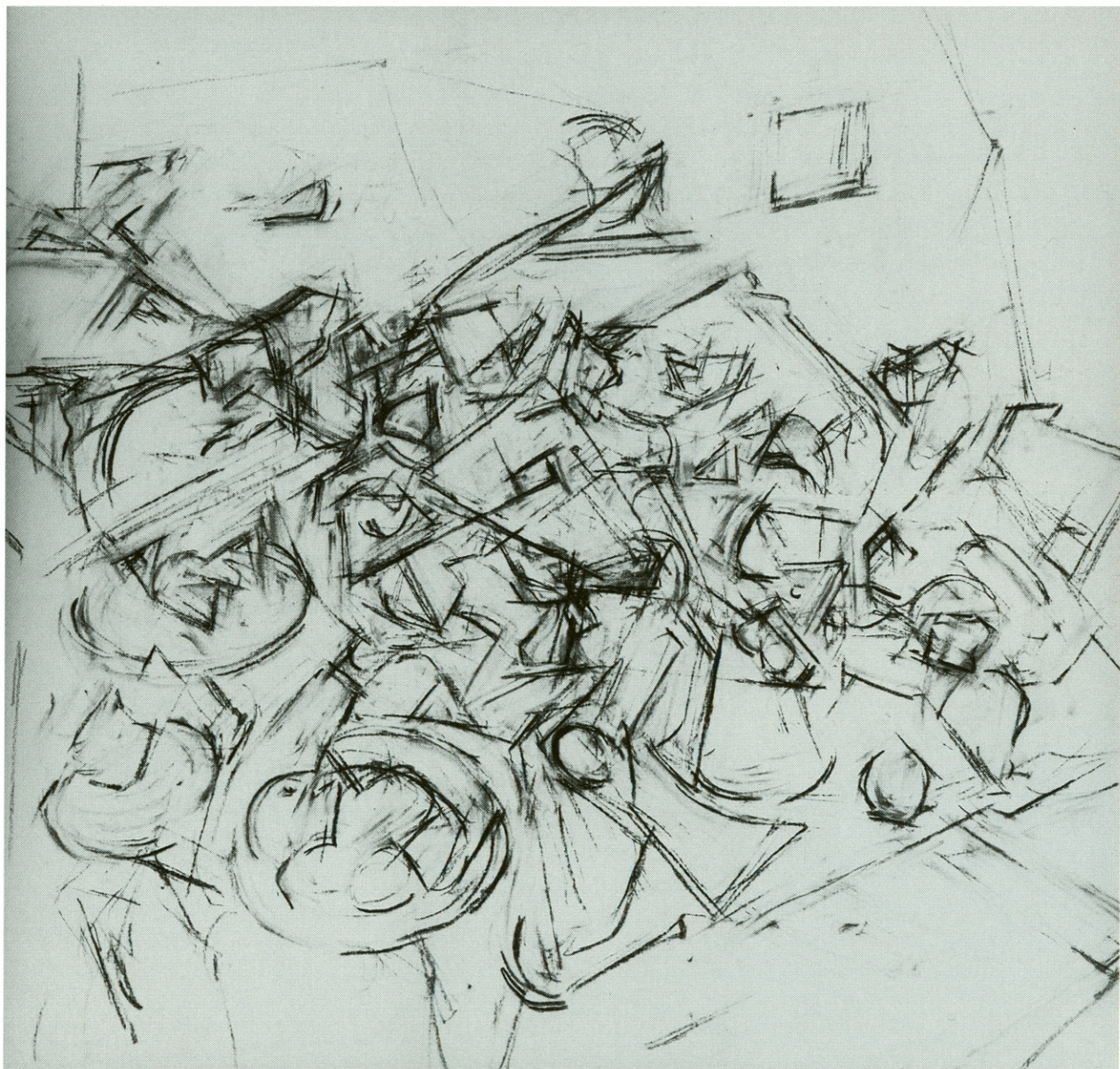
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Mercedes Matter

Education

Arthur B. Carles
Lu Duble
Maurice Sterne
Alexander Archipenko
Hans Hofmann

Experience

W.P.A. Mural Projects with Fernand Léger
Founding Member of American Abstract Artists
Founding Member of The Artists' Club

One-Person Shows

Tanager Gallery, 1956
Weintraub Gallery, 1963
Miami University, 1972
Brandeis University, 1973
Yale Norfolk, 1978
New York Studio School Gallery, 1979
Washington Art Association, 1979
East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art, 1986
New York Studio School Gallery, 1996
Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, 1996

Two-Person Shows

"Drawings," Gallery Schlesinger-Boisante, with Fritz Bultman, 1982
"Drawings and Paintings," American University, Watkins Collection, with Charles Cajori, 1988

Group Shows

American Abstract Artists, 1936-42
Stable Gallery, annual shows, 1950s
Peridot Gallery, early 1950s
Tanager Gallery, annual exhibitions, 1950s
"Selections from the Collection of Mrs. Henry Epstein," Goucher College, 1963
"Drawings," University of Texas at Austin, 1966
"Painterly Representation," Ingber Gallery, 1975 and repeated shows until late 1980s
Students of Hans Hofmann, Museum of Modern Art
"Visual Arts-Business and Creativity," Guilford College, 1982
"Figural Art of the New York School," Baruch College Gallery, 1985
"Drawing: Minneapolis College of Art," 1985
Colby College Museum of Art, 1987
New York Studio School Gallery
Elaine Benson Gallery, Bridgehampton
Vered Gallery, East Hampton
Parrish Museum, Southampton, 1989-90
"American Women Artists, Part I: Twentieth Century Pioneers," Sidney Janis Gallery, 1984
American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1990-1991

Honorary Degrees & Awards

Distinguished Teaching of Art Award, College Art Association, 1978
Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts)
Maryland Institute
Moore College of Art and Design

Selected Public and Private Collections

Leo Castelli
Ciba-Geigy Corporation
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Willem de Kooning
Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington
Miami University
Parrish Art Museum, Southampton
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro, N.C.
Whitney Museum of American Art

Writings

Monographs

"Hans Hofmann," *Arts and Architecture*, 1945
"Franz Kline," *Village Scene*, 1955
"Earl Kerkam," *Village Scene*, 1955
"Alberto Giacometti," *ARTnews*, 1960
"Alberto Giacometti," *Life Magazine*, 1966
"Buckminster Fuller," *Architectural Forum*, 1972

On Drawing

"Drawing," *It Is*, 1961
"Drawings &," University of Texas at Austin, Introduction to exhibition catalogue, 1966

On Art Education

"What's Wrong with U.S. Art Schools?" *ARTnews*, September, 1963
"Education and the Artist," *The Arts & Education: A New Beginning in Higher Education*, Sponsored by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 1968
"Drawing at the New York Studio School," *The New York Times*, Arts & Leisure, Sept. 2, 1973

Book

Alberto Giacometti, Text, with Photography by Herbert Matter, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1987

Selected Bibliography

Avis Berman, "MacDougal Alley: New York's Art Alley de Luxe," *Architectural Digest*, November, 1990
Erika Duncan, "In a Painter's Writings, a New Way of Thinking About Size," *The New York Times*, Sunday, Jan. 23, 1994
Louis Finkelstein, "The Paintings and Drawings of Mercedes Matter," *Modern Painters*, Autumn, 1991

Teaching

Philadelphia College of Art
(now University of the Arts), 1953-65
Pratt Institute, 1955-64
New York University, 1959-63
New York Studio School, 1964-present

Visiting Instructor

Antioch College
Brandeis University
Cincinnati School of Art
Kansas City Art Institute
Maryland Institute
Yale University
Yale Norfolk
Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture
American University

List of Illustrations

These drawings are from 1978 through 1996.

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Acknowledgments

The New York Studio School is a unique institution where drawing, painting, sculpture and art history are explored in depth. Founded by the Dean Emeritus and artists and students, with a faculty of working painters and sculptors, students have access to a diversity of attitudes from the most distinguished artists in their fields. The school also maintains a strong exhibition program as an important and integral part of the total education of practicing artists. This exhibition is part of this program.

The Studio School is a National Historic Landmark, once the site of the studios of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Daniel Chester French. It is also the original site of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The New York Studio School would like to thank the Richard Florsheim Art Fund and the New York State Council on the Arts for their generous contributions in support of this exhibition. We would also like to thank Salander-O'Reilly Galleries for making the second part of this exhibition possible.

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