

Jan 1985
Art New England

Regional Reviews

Raphael Soyer's New York



Raphael Soyer - *Portraits at a Party*, 1973-74, oil on canvas

In celebration of Cooper Union's 125th anniversary, Boston University professor Patricia Hills, an authority on social realism, regionalism, and the American Scene painters, organized an exhibition of a distinguished alumnus, *Raphael Soyer's New York: People and Places*. After opening at Cooper Union the exhibition traveled to the Boston University Art Gallery. This represents the first time that a major selection of works by Soyer (who summers in Provincetown, MA) has been seen in the New England area.

At the age of eighty-four, Raphael is the last of three Soyer brothers (the others were Isaac and Moses), all of whom were artists. Their parents emigrated from Russia in 1912. Raphael and his twin brother Moses were just fourteen when they started to study art at Cooper Union. The earliest work in the retrospective is a family scene, *Dancing Lesson*, from 1926. In addition to portraits of friends and family, a selection of paintings from the early 1930s includes stark street scenes and views of bridges.

The genre and street scenes by Soyer (especially masterpieces like the Whitney Museum's 1936 *Office Girls* and the Hirshhorn's 1959 *Farewell To Lincoln Square*) continued the tradition of Hopper and the Ashcan realism of Bellows, Luks, Sloan, and Henri. But he is different from these artists. Whereas Hopper was deadpan, morose, and distant, Soyer can be warmly probing and compassionate. His portraits reveal character but without the rapier wit found in works by Alice Neel. Soyer never skewers anyone, but we derive insights into his sitters. In Soyer's paintings from the 1930s we can feel the social and economic disaster of the Great Depression. But his work is never overtly political like that of the social realists Levine, Shahn, Gropper, and Evergood.

Yet the array of paintings from the 1920's to the present shows a consistent concern for other artists while recording the passing scene. He seems to be an unobtrusive observer, a benign and compassionate voyeur, but one who never indulges in anything salacious. Even his paintings of women—office workers, portraits of his wife, even nude models—have an even-tempered and private aura. These works always reveal an element of trust between the artist and his sitters.

The idea of the artist as voyeur is enforced by his frequent appearance in the New York street scenes. Usually he is discovered in the distance behind a group of women, but in a more recent work, *Quo Vadis* (1980), he had placed himself front and center. It is a strangely uneasy image; he seems very uncomfortable occupying center stage. In the large panoramic work *Portraits at a Party* (1973-1974) we see a dozen people selected from New York's artists, models, wives, children, friends. With a significant gap between this group and the right side of the canvas, we encounter a huddle of the brothers Soyer talking among themselves. This composition seems to speak to Soyer's intense sense of family. It depicts the brothers as involved with but metaphysically removed from the art world. It is this sense of distance that contributes to the sharpness of his observation of the nuances of surface and character.

It is fascinating to be able to study likenesses of some of the artist friends who have been depicted during his long career. The pudgy Philip Evergood is posed with an equally porcine pug on his lap. William Gropper is bent over, absorbed in work, while Milton Avery looks us in the eye. Robert Gwathmey leans back in a chair, and Jack Levine bends forward, clasping his hands in a penitent and intent gesture.

Undoubtedly Soyer's greatest contribution has been his objective recording of the passing scene. His portraits, street scenes, and genre interiors offer insights into the human element in the naked city.

Charles Giuliano