



IRVING KRIESBERG



# Irving Kriesberg

Celebrating the receipt of a Lee Krasner Award from the  
Pollock-Krasner Foundation for

## *A Lifetime of Achievement*

Paintings from 1952 to 2002

May 2 - 31, 2002

There will be a reception for the artist on  
Thursday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>

6 - 8 pm.



**Peter Findlay Gallery**

41 east 57th street new york 10022 - 212-644-4433

## April Kingsley on Irving Kriesberg:

Comics imitate art, which in turn imitates life. In all three one finds animals and other creatures standing in for people, ordinary people, superhuman people, or gods. Irving Kriesberg's art has involved all these levels and more for over fifty years, which is part of why he recently received the Lee Krasner Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. His immensely sophisticated world contains manifold elements: representatives of primitive cultures and religions, cartoon characters, historical figures, superheroes, animal stand-ins of all sorts, nature, artifice, humor, pain, and emotions trivial and profound. But his world is also very simple: it's a world made of paint (and sometimes clay) applied and manipulated with as little deliberation on his part as possible, his mind directing his hands spontaneously, only later discovering what it had told them to do. With his head filled with imagery from trans-global cultures and times prehistoric to the present, using esthetic fragments from a databank of experiences lived and seen in print over more than half a century, every painting is full of multiple allusions, sources and significances.

He attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (where he was born), the school that produced the Chicago Hairy Who not much later, and then he took an unusual next step — three years at the Escuela de Artes Plasticas in Mexico City. This accounts for much in later years: First, a multicultural grounding; second, a non-mainstream approach; third, independence from customary career modes; and last, so distinctive an approach to making art that he

has written three books about it, the latest, *Working With Color*, published by Simon & Schuster in 1985. In 1952 he was included in Dorothy Miller's highly prestigious *15 Americans* exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art along with Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clifford Still, and Edwin Dickinson. His style was more painterly then, but the subject matter is prototypically enigmatic. *Dancer Before The Sheep*, 1952, features a naked dancer with vaguely Picassooid anatomical aberrations cavorting before a calm and kingly

goat and a flock of sheep in a rocky landscape. The slightly cartoonish looks on the sheep's faces does nothing to deflect the high seriousness of whatever religious ritual seems to be in progress.

Dancing, a core part of many world religions and most cultures, was and remains a central activity in Kriesberg's work. In *The New Baby*, 1953, the baby lies amid four dancing figures leaping for joy. Seemingly both observed and diagrammed, the dancers could slip into the pages of a comic book or onto the walls of a cave painting with equal ease. This remains true of his figuration.

A 1984 canvas, *Dance of the Beginning*, has a great deal in common with the 1953 painting. In a painting like *Hands*, 1994, one is put in mind of a Buddhist *mudra* and a cartoon hand gesture simultaneously. In *White Ape*, 1974, one figure is all curves, the other completely rectilinear, but both are stick figures that recall Matisse as much as Egyptian hieroglyphs, comics characters, and Tantric designs. Matisse is also a source for the circling dancers in *Red Dance*, 1983, *Children's Dance*, 1992 and *The Yellow Guy*, 1998.



On The Cover: *My Son, My Son*, 1976, oil on canvas, 66 x 73 inches



Even small canvases, like *Lifting*, 1979, can have the epic sweep of larger ones, such as *Escalation*, 1967, *Edge I* and *Watcher*, both 1991, and *Tumbling*, 2000. Biblical proportions and the momentous are sensed. The monolithic heads, such as *Malcolm*, 1982, (inspired by Malcom X) and the gargantuan talking heads in *Up and Down*, 1980, *Caution*, 1981, *Dialogue*, 1984, and *Whirlwind and Dunhuang Couple I*, both 1991, recall Buddha-like, Olmec, or Constantinian sculptural icons. Like dancing, monologues and dialogues are frequent Kriesberg subjects. The latter often seem Talmudic, but then a sedate thoughtfulness pervades Kriesberg's work undaunted by the high key color applied in Fauvist daubs and dashes, and unfazed by the cartoonish drawing elements. *Whirlwind* is classic in that regard. Supplicants await the word of a god-like head emerging from the whirlwind/twisted tree (Tree of life?) before them. Head/helmet/skulls float disembodied in the protection of the tree. Is this about dying? Enlightenment? Are the cartoon-like wavy lines zipping around creating a force field or a safe zone? In 1982, Kriesberg said:

"My own early work was often of Biblical subject matter, and I confess that my intention today in my painting is no less religious; those dream images are meant to express some mystic order."

It should come as no surprise that Irving Kriesberg has also created animated films. Like Walt Whitman, what may seem like contradiction really isn't. It's simply that he too "contains multitudes."

April Kingsley  
Kresge Art Museum, 2002



Facing page: *Sketch*, 2002, pastel on paper, 29 x 23 inches

*Malcolm*, 1982, oil on canvas, 72 x 58 inches





*The Yellow Guy*, 1998, oil on canvas, 60 x 68 inches



## Irving Kriesberg

**Irving Kriesberg** was born in Chicago in 1919. After early studies at the University of Chicago and the Art Institute of Chicago where he got his B.F.A., he studied for three years at the Escuela de Artes Plasticas in Mexico City before coming to New York. He has done and accomplished so much since his first one-man show in 1946 at the Art Institute.

**He has been the subject of eight one-man museum exhibitions:** The Art Institute of Chicago; Detroit Institute of Art; Cincinnati Museum of Art; St. Louis Museum of Art; Jewish Museum, New York; Yale Museum, New Haven, CT.; Everson Museum, Syracuse, NY; and the Rose Art Museum, Boston.

**There have been 23 one-man gallery shows:** The first with the legendary Curt Valentine in 1955. In addition he has been included in important group shows at the Modern Museum, New York; Detroit Art Institute; Los Angeles County Museum; Guggenheim Museum, New York; invited to the Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, and an important show, "Emotional Impact, New York School Figurative Expressionism" which traveled the country between 1984-86.

**His work is included in many public collections,** including: Baltimore Museum; Cincinnati Museum; Butler Museum of Art, Youngstown, Ohio; Corcoran Gallery, Washington; Detroit Institute, Museum of Modern Art, New York; Kresge Art Museum, East Lansing, Michigan; Naropa Institute, Boulder; National Academy of Design, New York; Rose Art Museum, Boston; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Whitney Museum, New York; National Museum of American Art, Washington.

**Kriesberg has received over a dozen National awards,** including the Lee Krasner Award for Lifetime Achievement, the National Endowment for the Arts Award, the Guggenheim Foundation Memorial Award, Two New York State Council on the Arts CAPS Grants, a Fulbright Fellowship to India, two Ford Foundation Grants, as well as three Fellowships from the MacDowell Colony and a Yaddo Art Colony Fellowship. In 1983 he received the New York Cultural Center Commission to make a 40-foot "Peace Banner" exhibited throughout Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia, Japan and the USSR.

He has written three books, made videos and films and been a guest critic, curator and teacher at distinguished Universities throughout the United States and India.



*Dance Before The Sheep*, 1952, tempera, 42 x 48 inches