

FIGURE AND LANDSCAPE PAINTING BY

SIDEO FROMBOLUTI

FIGURE AND LANDSCAPE PAINTING BY SIDEO FROMBOLUTI

LANDMARK GALLERY

469 BROOME STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10013

NOVEMBER 8-NOVEMBER 28, 1980

OPENING SAT. NOV. 8, 4, TO 7 P.M.

INTRODUCTION BY APRIL KINGSLEY

Ever since art first came into existence, the human figure has been the artist's foremost subject. How the figure has been handled over the eons is, fundamentally, the stylistic history of art, but the human form itself has changed as well. Unlike readily imitable styles, the subtle differences in actual human face and figure from century to century and decade to decade are unfakable, as many a foiled forger can testify. The celestial countenances of Titian's time could no more be created in the days of Gericault's madmen than they could be re-created in the time of Picasso's careworn acrobats. Today's sex goddess isn't a cool 4th century Aphrodite on a pedestal, but a perfect "10" with real sexual appetites; today's "Thinker" cannot afford the luxury of concentrating on a single thought, even if it be the creation of the world. The contemporary human psyche is multi-layered, and average modern existence takes place on overlapping, shifting planes of convergent and divergent roles, successive physical situations, and alternating levels of intellectual and emotional involvement. The profound complexity of humanity today demands an equally deep response from the artist.

Sideo Fromboluti is one of the few modern figure painters actively grappling with the problems of depicting contemporary human complexity. He is too honest to idealize his subjects, or to ignore their sexuality, and too stubborn to simply de-emphasize their faces to avoid confronting their psychological state. He is too committed and serious to reduce them to bland caricatures or to blow them up into de-humanized billboard cartoons, and, ultimately, too involved with the mystery of life and of paint to settle for the "magic" of mere imitation—an effect easily achieved through a camera/projection system. Fromboluti draws from live models he knows, acutely observing their moods and behavior, and then empathetically transferring what he sees and senses to paper. As the working drawings evolve into full-scale paintings, the psychological record of the sitter is filtered through his own emotions in the process of coming into physical existence as heavy paint on canvas (this surface aspect being a measure of how much labor went into the painting, as well as a Fromboluti trademark). In addition, and this is the most important part of any art-making procedure, he submits his subjects to his own, innermost obsessions, and transforms them into mysterious, semi-symbolic manifestations of an ineffable idea.

This "idea" germinated under highly specific and unusual circumstances for Fromboluti, but, like every artist's hidden obsession, it has been a lasting influence on his work. In the late

fifties, while drinking ouzo and eyeing the dancers in a Greek belly-dancing joint in Greenwich Village one night with his wife and Merle and Nick Marsicano, he was deep in conversation about various painting concepts then under generally heavy discussion both inside and outside the Artist's Club. "As we mulled over these abstractions," he recalls, "the belly dancer continued to wiggle in the eerie, smoke-filled room and it occurred to me, as I watched her, that she was a non-objective form vibrating in an undulating, mysterious, negative/positive space. This image seemed to fit harmoniously into all our new spatial discoveries." Fromboluti's discovery of a personal parallel between actual subject matter in three-dimensional space and the Abstract Expressionist picture field which united everything into a single overall sensory feel brought all the strands of his esthetic position together. Since then he has made no major changes in that position; he has simply allowed more and more specific detail into the paintings.

Fromboluti's tawdry vestiges of harem life connect with Delacroix's *Odaliskes*, de Kooning's Marilyn Monroe, Picasso's dreamy saltimbanques, and with the dancing nymphs on the Greek vases he collects, yet they seem psychologically alive in the present tense. Confronting his frequently somber, sometimes boredom-deadened, occasionally exhausted or sex-obsessed, or frightened figures can be an unsettling experience. By not living nostalgically in the past when life and people were simpler, but instead facing the complex human being of today head on, Fromboluti offers us a view of ourselves we may not like. For that matter, how many of us are pleased by a look in the mirror? Considering our high suicide, divorce, murder, and psychosis rates—not overly many. Any artist who responds in depth to humanity is placed in that dilemma.

During the summers, Fromboluti takes a rest, so to speak, from the arduous demands of figure painting—he paints landscapes in an open studio on a pond in the Wellfleet woods of Cape Cod. Unlike the figure, landscapes have only recently become a major subject of artists. It wasn't until nature became precious—in 17th century Europe, and particularly in 19th century America as it succumbed to the relentless inroads of civilization—that an emotional market developed for this genre. Poets, philosophers, religious leaders, and politicians all joined forces with the art critics in 19th century America to encourage the artist to paint uplifting, morally righteous peans to God and Country as the spirit of each was made manifest in the splendors of our natural scenery. This tradition was continued in 1976 when a huge exhibition of landscape painting travelled

around the U.S. as part of its Bi-centennial celebration.

While not an especially religious or patriotic man, Fromboluti holds Thoreau's concept that "the mystery of the life of plants is kindred to that of our own lives" at the center of his esthetic position. He endeavors to incorporate all the human senses—feeling, hearing, smelling, tasting as well as seeing—into his landscapes in order to bring them alive. Aware of the elemental feel of the outdoors as he paints, he finds his forms responding, changing, taking on lives of their own that reflect, one day in a particular picture, the still, sweet air of the ponds; in another, the clamorous frenzy of a rainstorm; and the damp muskiness of heated water in the next. A recently completed painting of a storm, for example, is dominated by two arcing zig-zags of lightning. Powerful as these images are they do not, however, comprise the only element conveying the electric shock of the moment. The jangled nerve-end tree branches, the radiant yellow glows that zip along each pond wavelet, and the eerie greyish-gold light pervading the scene conjoin to create this effect, which seems to surround you with the sounds and smells of a summer storm evening.

Fromboluti's approach is significantly different from that of earlier painters of landscape, as well as from that of his peers. At heart still an Abstract Expressionist, he seeks a unified, all-over sensory feel/field which equates paint with emotion. As opposed to this, both the prudently modest Luminism of Kensett and the grandiose depictions of Cole and Church were characterized by crystalline legibility and photographic verisimilitude continues to be a common goal among most contemporary landscapists. Perversely, Fromboluti's free-wheeling and forthright painterliness, his thickly encrusted surfaces, his deliberately non-linear compositions, and his trust in pure color married to pure emotion, have tended to put up barriers between his vision and that of the public. Our pragmatic, no-frills, "Puritan" population has always put its trust in the easily readable picture. But as the mass mistrust of abstraction and pure painterliness erodes, such barriers will surely crumble. Abstract Expressionism broke through this native resistance to achieve the sublime in abstraction, and it is probably only a matter of time before such parallel heights of achievement in representational painting will also be accepted.