Ira Joel Haber

Retrospective Exhibition
1969-1977

October 30 - November 23
Ira Joel Haber is a New Yorker's New Yorker, but if any other region dare claim him, that region would be northeastern Ohio. Haber's first exhibition outside New York City was a conceptual show at Oberlin College in 1970. His first trip outside New York (and his first plane ride) was to the Kent campus in 1971 where he returned the following year to visit poet Alex Gildzen. In 1973 Haber's work was exhibited again in this area, at the Akron Art Institute.

Haber's ties to Kent State University are strong. He has donated material to the University's library, published in the library's (now defunct) quarterly The Serif, and done a cover for the library's Occasional Papers. A poem of Haber's was one of "Two Poems for Sylvia Sidney" which Gildzen's Toucan Press printed here to commemorate the appearance on campus of that famous film star.

The Gallery of the School of Art has the opportunity to bring Ira Joel Haber back to Kent and to present the first Retrospective Exhibition of this important artist's work thanks to the generosity and support of Akron area collectors and patrons of the arts Walter and Virginia Wojno.

We are further indebted to Alex Gildzen who has been a major contributor to this catalogue, to Allan Maxwell who photographed Haber's work in New York, to Phillip R. Hales who designed the catalogue, to the Gallery staff and in particular Michael Milligan, assistant to the Director, whose imaginative and tireless efforts facilitated the realization of this exhibition.

Sheila K. Tabakoff
Director of the Galleries
Haber's Shattered Landscapes: Studies In Nature and Time

Alex Gildzen

Ira Joel Haber was born in Brooklyn in 1947. He began constructing landscapes in boxes in 1969. He never left New York until 1971. But just as Joseph Cornell, to whom he wrote in 1970, didn't have to travel far from Flushing to invent the big small worlds he put into boxes, Haber didn't need to trek the mountains of America from the Berkshires to the Rockies in order to make "Small Red Mountain in a Box" (cat. no. 8). Haber's landscapes, though rooted in the reality of the ecological nightmare of the 20th century, are timeless landscapes of the interior. He explained in 1975:

Nature frightens. No slow early autumn walks in the country for me. Nature is a mother with a knife, ready to pounce on us without warning. Mountains collapse, rivers reclaim, skies open up, and caves swallow. But there is also a beauty in this destruction. Keeping myself far away from all things that are natural is what I have a sweet tooth for. The landscapes of my mind reach out for other minds in beautiful acts of aggression.

Haber's interest in art began early. His personal need to work small, as well as his vision of the beauty of destruction, are presaged in his earliest known piece of sculpture — a crude construction of white plastic building blocks on a black base. This curious piece, made when Haber was 11, resembles the ruins of a building. The artist didn't rediscover it until 1971 in a box of childhood momentoes his mother had saved at the family home.

Although he worked briefly in commercial art and did collages and conceptual works, Haber's formal career as a sculptor begins in 1969, the year he constructed his first box, "New York Box No. 1" (cat. no. 1). This work, as well as the next three boxes in the New York series which continued into 1970, incorporates photographs liberated from magazines and other printed sources.

As the artist developed his craft and sharpened his personal vision, he moved away from found photographs as backdrops to create within his boxes eerie microcosms unlike any that ever existed in art. His desolate crags may echo Salvatore Rosa, his trees growing out of sky René Magritte, and the bullet-scarred "window" through which one views "Small Forest in a Box" (cat. no. 6) film noir. But the artist, while unafraid of acknowledging past masters, remains clearly his own man ("My own personal experiences have had a greater influence on my art than any art movement.").

Haber's world is peopleless but haunted by the destruction man is able to deal his environment. That man is as incendiary as nature is apparent when the viewer of Haber's burnt houses attempts to determine the author of the arson (cf. cat. no. 10). People no longer exist among the detritus but by physically framing his vision within a box or inside the heavy black borders of his drawings Haber reaches out to people forcing them to look in, to scrutinize. What they see may not seem the work of an artist who lives in man's grandest concrete playground but as Lifton and Olson observe: "... the enduring rhythms of nature have a significance that is undiminished, and perhaps intensified, for those city-dwellers to whom they are no longer visible."
The rhythms of nature parallel the cycles of time. The historian Thompson writes: “The idea of history is a shattered landscape in which the individual moves through a world of discontinuities: Mississippi riverboats, medieval castles, and rocket ships equally fill the reality of a single moment.” In the shattered vistas of his sculpture, as well as the drawings with their bold Matisse strokes and the paintings on paper which often resemble abstract expressionist landscapes, Haber offers a visa for a voyage through time.

His is a body of work already staggering in its originality and rich in its complexity. The artist says: “It is better that people get lost in my art than try to find their way out.” But finding a way out has always been as important a function of art as getting lost. And to extricate oneself from Haber’s shattered landscapes is to come to terms with nature while also discovering one’s own moment in time. Once one finds that moment the next step is timelessness.

Notes

2 Indeed Haber uses the limitation of his space like a cinematographer to open up worlds.


4 The only faces he’s produced in his post-1969 work have been drawings in response to poetry: a three-eyed person for the cover of Funny Ducks (East Lansing, Michigan, Ghost Dance Press, 1973) and a portrait of John Perreault in Harry (Toronto, Canada, Coach House Press, 1974).


7 Sager interview, op. cit.
William Anthony
Painter, New York City

Ira Joel Haber depicts a world which has been curiously and wonderfully exhumed from some obscure part of our psyches. I'm fascinated.

Lynda Benglis
Sculptress/Painter, New York City

Ira's work, to me, always seemed very unique in its element of non-peopled psychodrama and quite typically American because of its directness in relating to our architectural landscapes. The work has always had a nightmarish quality which draws the viewer into those mindscapes we know but never have experienced until viewing Ira's work.

Nancy Holt
Sculptress/Film Maker, New York City

IRA
IRASIBLE
IRONICAL
IRRADIANT
IRREGULAR
IRRESOLUTE
IRRATIONAL
IRREDUCIBLE
IRREVERSIBLE
IRREPRESSIBLE
IRREPLACEABLE

Ray Johnson
Painter, Locust Valley, N.Y.

Ira Joel Haber's work is so good because it is so tough and uncompromising. Unlike too many young artists today, you can never mistake a piece by Haber for a piece by another artist. His beautiful, large output over the years is totally shot-through with his original - personal - magical vision.

Judith Murray
Painter, New York City

I have high regard for Ira Joel Haber as an artist and as a friend.

Lowell Nesbitt
Painter, New York City

Eccentric in their humility, these extremely personal dioramas of uncelebrated architectural events, exist as strong voices of 1970's art revolution.

Ira's uncanny ability to drop Swiss Cheese meteorites and melted Noah's Arks in aquarium landscapes, is certainly a welcome and witty art gesture that is profoundly serious.

Wm. Schwedler
Painter, New York City

Statements about Ira Joel Haber by Other Artists
Ed Shostak
Sculptor, New York City

The Nature of I.J.H.

A forest with its trees growing horizontally, emerging from the background of a “scene,” towards the viewer, twisted and contorted, not unlike the Japanese pruning methods where a flowering bush is flattened out and forced to grow in an unnatural-looking manner; an often disorienting, polluted, burnt and otherwise marred panorama. The main image — the house — represents the family and stability, all of which have been ravished in destruction. Why these seemingly anti-social reenactments? Perhaps violence untapped from childhood?

But to merely make psychological analogies would abort the intense formal invention in these “scenic views.” The house is not only a human metaphor but a strong “found” sculptural module — a minimal inert volume or a Pop Image. 1 However, not being a minimal nor a Pop sculptor, I.J. H. emerged publicly in 1971, and like many younger artists imposed his particular sensibilities on an otherwise inert and banal structure. Objects are acted upon and therefore they are altered.

Grasping for a precedent to Haber’s improbable works one thinks of Max Ernst’s 1924 relief, “Two Children Are Frightened by a Nightingale.” This work (which Ira saw in his earlier years) perhaps gave him the go-ahead to “do his thing.” It encompasses many similar ingredients — the menacing drama — the unorthodox methods of relief construction — the poetry. 2

It is an evocative and disturbing poetry that emerges, and although one could discuss the work in terms of pollution, conservation, politics, etc., it is clearly the poetic vision that is long-lasting.

1 One thinks of Ira’s friend Bob Smithson, whose work was sympathetic to his own nature, and which he admired.

2 There is no doubt that Joseph Cornell made an impact on the artist.

Sylvia Sleigh
Painter, New York City

The beautiful little boxes of Brooklyn Bridge and the New York skyline, the first works of Ira Joel’s that I saw, did not prepare me for the presence, the ominousness of his later work.

This sense of apprehension is present in boxes which contain familiar-looking buildings ("early Nothing," to quote Gloria Grahame in The Big Heat), but in unidentifiable places. There is a sense of timelessness and foreboding that suggests both a fearful past and a day of reckoning still to come.

This day has arrived in the later works, where destruction of the physical world reaches a climax: trees in the sky, desolation on earth. His tiny forms denote not a world, but the world.

Marjorie Strider
Sculptress, New York City

I first met Ira Joel Haber one sunny morning in 1968 in an apartment on Tenth St. He was, at the tender age of twenty one, eating his corn flakes and milk.

In the nine years since that day, I have hated, loved, screamed, cried, laughed, gone over the edge several times and produced a lot of very good sculpture. I feel Ira Joel’s history parallels mine. Through all life’s machinations in those nine years we have managed to keep a friendship and a respect for each other’s work alive and kicking. That is an incredible accomplishment.

Michelle Stuart
Painter/Sculptress, New York City

“The nightingale who looks down into the river from the top of a branch, thinks that it has fallen in. It is high up in the oak tree, yet is afraid of drowning.”

Cyrano De Bergerac
Ira Joel Haber
105 W 27th
NYC 10001

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260 West Broadway
NYC 10013

(216) 925-8386

- **Exhibitions:**

  

- **Group Exhibitions:**

  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  "Cologne Art Fair (Kunstmarkt)," Cologne, Germany, 1971.
  
  
  
  "Cologne Art Fair (Kunstmarkt)," Cologne, Germany, 1972.
  
  
  
  


"Cologne Art Fair (Kunstmarkt)," Cologne, Germany, 1975.

"40 Years of American Collage," Bueche and Harpsichords, New York City, and St. Peter's College Art Gallery, Jersey City, New Jersey, 1976.


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**Publications:**

*RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL.*


*SURVEY.*


*36 HOUSES.*


*FILMS NUMBER ONE.*


*FILMS NUMBER TWO.*


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**Covers:**


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**Awards and Grants:**

1974 Creative Artists Public Service Grant (CAPS)-Sculpture

1974-75 National Endowment Fellowship-Sculpture

1976-77 Creative Artists Public Service Grant (CAPS)-Graphics

1977 Change Inc.

1977-78 National Endowment Fellowship-Sculpture

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**Collections:**

Neue Galerie, The Ludwig Collection, Aachen, West Germany

The Estate of Robert Smithson

Sylvia Sleigh, New York City

Rafael Ferrer, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Wolfgang Hahn, Cologne, Germany

Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Lewis, Richmond, Virginia

Lynda Benglis, New York City

Samuel Fuller, Hollywood, California

Marjorie Strider, New York City

Dr. Alf Obbelode, Cologne, West Germany

Ed Shostak, New York City

Cynthia Carlson, New York City

John Perreault, New York City

Bill Jensen, New York City

Arthur and Carol Goldberg, New York City

Pam Adler, Cara Ryan, New York City

Alex Gildzen, Kent Ohio

Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

New York University Art Collection, New York City
• Periodicals:


David Shapiro, "Mr. Processionary at the Conceptacle," ART NEWS (September 1970), p. 60.


Peter Frank, "Reviews," ART NEWS (February 1977), pp. 121-122.

Corinne Robbins, "Nature is a Mother With a Knife: The Malevolent Landscapes of Ira Joel Haber," ARTS (November 1977), pp. 96-98.

• Articles:


Two poems, THE WORLD, No. 18 (February-March 1970).

"Elizabeth," CENTER, No. 3 (1972).


• Books:


3. *Forest Floor Piece*, 1969

1. **New York Box No. 1**, 1969  
   Mixed media  
   4 7/8 x 9 1/2 x 2 1/2 in.  
   Lent by John Perreault  
   New York City

2. **Box With Yellow and White House and Four Telephone Poles**, 1969  
   Mixed media  
   6 3/4 x 5 3/8 x 2 1/8 in.  
   Private Collection  
   New York City

3. **Forest Floor Piece**, 1969*  
   Mixed media  
   3 x 28 x 30 in.  
   Exh.: M. E. Thelen Gallery, Cologne, Germany 1972; "Rooms," P.S. 1, Long Island City, N.Y. 1976  
   Lent by the artist

4. **Floor Pieces (10)**, 1969-70  
   Mixed media  
   a. **Two Small Houses and One Tree**, 1969  
      4 1/4 x 9 1/2 x 5 in.  
   b. **Bank**, 1969  
      4 1/2 x 12 1/16 x 5 1/8 in.  
   c. **Small Pink and Brown House**, 1969  
      4 x 6 5/8 x 5 3/8 in.  
   d. **Orange and Green Colonial House**, 1969  
      4 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 5 in.  
   e. **Contemporary House**, 1969  
      3 1/2 x 12 x 5 1/8 in.  
   f. **Small Green Gas Station**, 1969  
      3 1/4 x 9 1/2 x 5 in.  
   g. **Road House Restaurant**, 1970  
      5 1/2 x 9 9/16 x 4 7/8 in.  
   h. **Small Church**, 1970  
      7 1/2 x 6 5/8 x 5 3/8 in.  
   i. **Blue and Yellow House**, 1970  
      4 1/2 x 9 3/8 x 5 in.  
   j. **Commercial Bakery**, 1970  
      9 x 12 x 11 in.  
   Exh.: Fischbach Gallery, New York City 1971; M. E. Thelen Gallery, Cologne, Germany 1972  
   Lent by the artist
Entries:

5. Big Box No. 3, 1970
   mixed media
   43 x 51 x 15 in.
   Lent by the artist

6. Small Forest In A Box, 1970
   mixed media
   5 x 7 x 4 1/8 in.
   Lent by Alex Gildzen
   Kent, Ohio

7. Small Box With White House, 1970*
   mixed media
   6 3/4 x 5 3/8 x 2 1/8 in.
   Exh.: Hundred Acres Gallery, New York City 1971; Museum of Modern Art, New York City 1971; Fischbach Gallery, New York City 1971
   Lent by Ed Shostak
   New York City

8. Small Red Mountain In A Box, 1971*
   mixed media
   5 1/4 x 6 3/4 x 2 1/4 in.
   Exh.: Fischbach Gallery, New York City 1972
   Lent by Jean-Noel Herlin
   New York City

9. Open Box No. 4, 1971
9. Open Box No. 4, 1971*
   mixed media
   15 x 11 1/2 x 10 in.
   Exh.: Fischbach Gallery, New York City 1971
   Lent by the artist

10. White House and Forest In A Box, 1971*
    mixed media
    5 x 7 x 4 1/8 in.
    Exh.: Fischbach Gallery, New York City 1971; M. E. Thelen Gallery, Cologne, Germany 1972; School of Visual Arts Museum, New York City 1977
    Lent by the artist

11. Forest Diptych, 1972
    mixed media
    5 1/8 x 14 x 10 in.
    Exh.: Fischbach Gallery, New York City 1972
    Lent by the artist

12. June Box, 1972
    mixed media
    7 6/8 x 11 1/2 x 5 5/8 in.
    Exh.: Fischbach Gallery, New York City 1972
    Lent by the artist

13. The Trees, 1973*
    mixed media
    10 1/4 x 14 x 12 1/4 in.
    Exh.: Fischbach Gallery, New York City 1974
    Lent by the artist

14. Tondos (10), 1973
    mixed media
    20 in. diameter
    Exh.: Fischbach Gallery, New York City 1974
    Lent by the artist

15. Kerouac, 1974*
    mixed media
    10 1/4 x 25 x 10 1/4 in.
    Exh.: Rutgers University Art Gallery, New Brunswick, New Jersey 1975
    Lent by the artist

16. Wolfe, 1975
    mixed media
    9 7/8 x 24 3/4 x 9 1/2 in.
    Lent by Bill Jensen
    New York City

17. Summer Landscapes (10), 1976
    acrylic on paper
    14 x 16 3/4 in.
    Lent by the artist

18. Real Abstraction, 1976
    mixed media
    11 5/8 x 25 1/2 x 12 1/4 in.
    Exh.: Edward Thorpe Gallery, New York City 1976
    Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Ivan Koota
    New York City

19. Black and White All Over, 1977*
    mixed media
    11 1/4 x 26 x 12 1/2 in.
    Lent by the artist

* Illustrated in catalogue
15. Kerouac, 1974
