



Photo by Bob Van Lindt

Len Rosenfeld, 82, artist known for ‘wire paintings’

By Julie Shapiro

Leonard Rosenfeld, an expressionist artist who lived and worked Downtown for 50 years, died last Wednesday night at the age of 82.

Rosenfeld was a link to the abstract expressionist movement of the 1950s and '60s with colorful memories of fellow artists Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. His work was shown around the country and in Mexico and continues to be shown in the city.

“It’s a loss for the art world,” said Rodrigo Salomon, who staged Rosenfeld’s last show this fall at Salomon Arts in Tribeca. “He just brought something real. I’ve never seen anything like it. People couldn’t find a place for him, because they didn’t understand what he was doing.”

The Salomon Arts exhibit focused on Rosenfeld’s most unusual work: a series of “wire paintings” from the 1980s, consisting of brightly colored wire wrapped around wooden canvas stretchers to create pieces that told stories. Salomon plans to re-hang the show at his Leonard St. gallery in memory of Rosenfeld.

In recent years, Rosenfeld’s work grew more political, including series on 9/11 and the Iraq War. The 9/11 paintings, which reflect Rosenfeld’s memories of the day, caught the attention of Danny Simmons, chairperson of the New York State Council on the Arts (and Russell Simmons’ brother). Simmons gave Rosenfeld a solo show after seeing the paintings.

In an interview over the summer, Simmons said Rosenfeld was under-recognized in the art world because he didn’t go out of his way to promote himself.

“He spent his time being an artist,” Simmons told Downtown Express in August. “Len just does the work, and he’s really successful with the work.”

Rosenfeld was born in Brooklyn in 1926 and served in the Army and Air Force in World War II, where his realistic pornographic drawings made him popular among the generals. After the war, Rosenfeld attended the Art Students League and immersed himself in the Downtown art scene. He lived and worked on Forsyth St., sharing the neighborhood with prostitutes who loitered on his stoop and inspired his “hookers and pimps” series.

Rosenfeld married for the second time in 1991 and moved his new bride to the Financial District, where he lived and maintained a studio.

Rosenfeld continued creating art until he was admitted to N.Y.U. Medical Center this summer for heart surgery. A couple days before the surgery, Downtown Express visited Rosenfeld in his hospital room, where his most recent self-portraits hung on the walls. Rosenfeld was weak but in good spirits, laughing as he told stories of the wild parties and fights and love affairs that defined the city’s art scene when he arrived in the 1950s.

“Those days were pretty intense,” Rosenfeld said in August. “That’s when art, you were really with it every moment, not like today.”

Rosenfeld spoke then of an idea for his next project, “something very big, like the size of the wall,” he said. “But I don’t know what it would be exactly.”

Rosenfeld’s heart surgery several days later, on Aug. 11, went as well as could be expected, but Rosenfeld never recovered his strength. On the evening of last Wed., Dec. 2, Rosenfeld’s wife Janet Hoffman succeeded in bringing her husband home to his studio for the last time. Rosenfeld died shortly after he arrived.

Rosenfeld is survived by his wife Hoffman, sister Anita Faye, and two daughters from a previous marriage, Francesca Pastine and Michelle Dickinston.

The funeral was held Sunday at the Plaza Jewish Community Chapel on the Upper West Side, and internment followed at the Mt. Eden cemetery in Hawthorne, N.Y. Hoffman delivered the eulogy on what would have been her and Rosenfeld’s 18th wedding anniversary.

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