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From de Kooning to hookers, 50 years in the Downtown art scene

BY JULIE SHAPIRO

Leonard Rosenfeld stood beside his latest self-portrait, wavering slightly.

The piece, in green, fuchsia and black pastel, hung in Rosenfeld's hospital room at N.Y.U. Medical Center, where he was awaiting heart surgery last week. In the drawing, Rosenfeld, 82, clenched a paintbrush; his goatee and black-framed glasses made the resemblance unmistakable.

Rosenfeld's wife and friends, who gathered at the hospital last week, were careful to refer to the drawing, completed a week earlier, as

the artist's "latest," not his "last." And Rosenfeld was in good spirits as well, despite his bandages and institutional surroundings. With growing vigor, he told stories from his half-century in New York's Downtown arts scene, encompassing everything from the wild '50s and '60s to the more sedate present.

"Those days were pretty intense," he said of his start in the decades after World War II. "That's when art, you were really with it every moment, not like today."

Rosenfeld's expressionist work vibrates with sharp lines and overt feeling, whether in

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Pete Gleason, right, criticized Councilmember Alan Gerson, center, repeatedly Monday night at a First District City

Downtown Express photo by Jefferson Siegel

Hockey and beer

Artist Len Rosenfeld's half century in the Downtown scene

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his early black-crayon drawings of elevated railroad tracks or his more recent oil paintings of soldiers in the Iraq War. The figures in his paintings often loom large and exaggerated, and he juxtaposes images of Minnie Mouse and guns, or a toilet and an American flag, to make political points.

Among his most nontraditional works are his "wire paintings," in which he wrapped colorful wire around rectangular canvas stretchers to create representational images. The wire paintings sell for five figures.

Some of Rosenfeld's strongest memories from his career come from the Cedar Tavern, the bar on University Pl. that served as informal headquarters of the abstract expressionist movement in the 1950s and '60s.

"Everybody was there," Rosenfeld said, listing his friends Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. Jackson Pollock was a regular, too, but he was in the Hamptons when Rosenfeld arrived on the scene and he was killed there before Rosenfeld could meet him.

Art was a common topic of conversation — de Kooning, in particular, would speak of nothing else — but the Cedar was far from a buttoned-up affair. Rosenfeld once found de Kooning lying in the gutter outside, passed out and covered in money. Rosenfeld collected the bills, gave them to the bartender, and dragged de Kooning home. After settling de Kooning into bed, Rosenfeld returned to the Cedar, where, several hours later, he was surprised to see the artist walk in, cleaned up and ready to continue drinking.

Another night, de Kooning recalled overhearing Clement Greenberg and another art critic talking at the Cedar. When Greenberg said Pollock was the greatest painter of the day, de Kooning turned around and slapped the critic in the face. The men jumped on each other and started throwing punches, until Rosenfeld and others stepped in to separate them.

Rosenfeld also recalled a deal he witnessed between Kline and an art collector, in which Kline agreed to trade several of his mammoth black-and-white paintings to the collector in exchange for a brand-new Ferrari shipped directly from Italy. Kline and the art collector shook on it, and shortly thereafter Kline drove up to the Cedar in his new Ferrari, which Rosenfeld said became a regular fixture out front.

As Rosenfeld described the all-night loft parties, the artists who grew rich overnight and the sudden death of Andy Warhol, he shook his head.

"Those were moments, they were like a movie script," Rosenfeld said. "Everybody was pretty wild."

"You'll never have a scene like that again," Rosenfeld added. "That was truly like a renaissance...a modern renaissance. Everything went dead after that, as far as I'm concerned. The whole art scene kind of died after abstract expressionism."

Rosenfeld isn't an abstract expressionist himself, because he felt that type of work had already been done. Rosenfeld's work has a similar intensity but is representational and often tells a story. He takes inspiration from current events and his own observations, and much of his work makes a political statement.

"I never really had any goals," Rosenfeld said. "The only goal is what I was doing immediately."

Rosenfeld's artwork has drawn many acolytes, including Danny Simmons, an artist and gallery owner who was recently named chairperson of the New York State Council on the Arts, and who is also Russell Simmons' brother.

"Len's work is direct," Simmons said by phone this week. "You get a certain feeling about the artist, what he thinks about and what he feels about it."

Simmons has shown Rosenfeld's work several times, including a solo exhibit of post-9/11 paintings that reflect Rosenfeld's memories of the day, which include seeing people jump from the smoking towers. After 9/11, Rosenfeld did a series of paintings depicting pink angels floating against a background of multi-colored dots, reflecting the confusion over how to "connect the dots" of what happened that day.

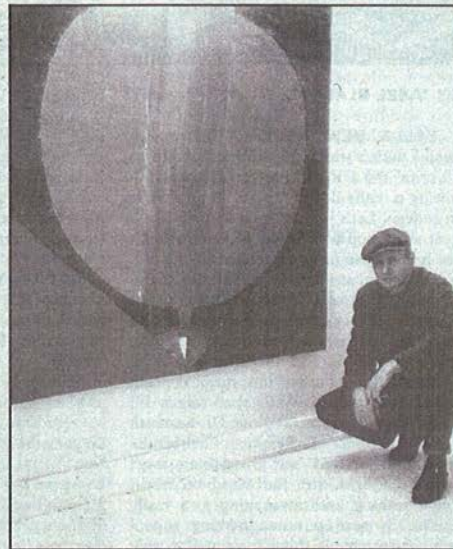
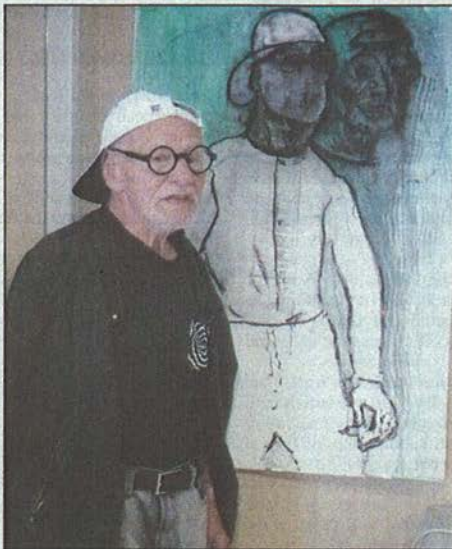


Photo by Vernita Nemeč/N Cognita

Leonard Rosenfeld in the hospital last week with one of his self-portraits, above left, and in 1959 at the Waverly Gallery at his first show. The painting is "Falling Star." Below, one of Rosenfeld's distinctive wire paintings, "Chinatown - The Year of the Fish" from 1985.

Simmons thinks Rosenfeld is under-recognized in the art world because he doesn't promote himself the way other artists do.

"He spent his time being an artist," Simmons said. "Len just does the work, and he's really successful with the work."

Rosenfeld's longtime friend, the artist Vernita Nemeč, likes Rosenfeld's work because it is personal.

"He's got a very aggressive approach to reality," Nemeč said. "It's never abstract. There's always a kind of strength."

Rosenfeld's projects often start with big ideas — like the General David Petraeus quote referring to the Iraq War, "Tell me how this ends?" — but his process remains focused on the act of creating art.

As he works, Rosenfeld said, "I'm not feeling anything else but what it requires to do the painting or the drawing."

Asked what he wanted to do next, Rosenfeld at first turned glum.

"I don't know if I'm going to do anything next," he said. But after a few minutes Rosenfeld perked up, and interrupted another thought to add, "I'd like to do something very big, like the size of the wall," he said. "But I don't know what it would be exactly."

Rosenfeld had heart surgery Tuesday, several days after the interview, to replace his aortic valve. The next day, his wife Janet Hoffman said he was recovering as well as could be expected.

Rosenfeld's memory is still strong, but it sometimes requires a jump-start, usually provided by Hoffman, a lawyer. During the interview last week, Hoffman, 63, encouraged her husband to tell a reporter how he made his early railroad drawings.

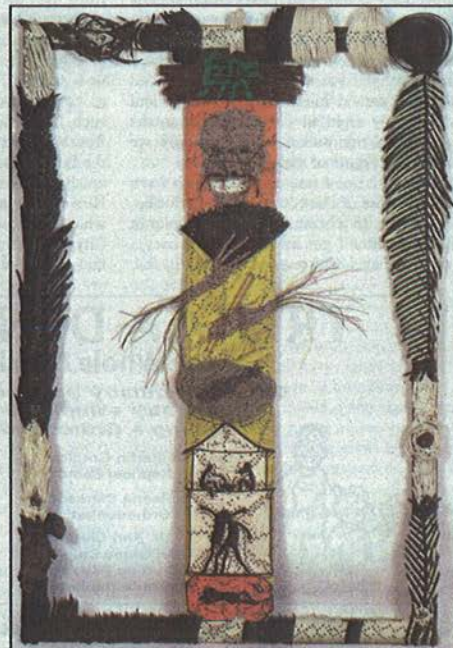
"How did I make them?" Rosenfeld asked.

"Well, you tell her," Hoffman replied.

"I don't know — I'm asking you how I made them," Rosenfeld said.

"You remember," Hoffman said, and it turned out that he did. Rosenfeld paused, then launched into the narrative of his 1957 railroad drawings: how he perched on elevated train stations in Brooklyn and Queens, sketching furiously with black crayon, using sharp lines to render the tracks weaving between the buildings.

Several of the drawings are on display now in the Van Der Plas Gallery on Pier 17 until Aug. 28.



"It just comes from his soul," said Adriaan van der Plas, who has owned the Seaport gallery for 18 years. The railroad drawings are among Rosenfeld's strongest work because of their immediacy, van der Plas said.

Rosenfeld also has several upcoming exhibits, including a show opening Oct. 15 at Salomon Arts in Tribeca and one opening mid-September at Sabay, a Thai restaura-

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Rosenfeld's reflections Downtown

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rant in Jackson Heights.

Rosenfeld was born in Brooklyn in 1926 and was drafted to serve in World War II while still in high school. During the war, while posted in Guam, he filled the walls of a warehouse with "lascivious, pornographic drawings," as he put it. When a general discovered the drawings during a routine inspection, Rosenfeld expected to be reprimanded. But instead, the general asked if he could take some of the drawings to keep.

"I said, 'Sure, take what you want,'" Rosenfeld said.

After the war, Rosenfeld attended The Art Students League on 57th St. and then spent the next decade alternating between collecting unemployment and working in odd jobs like framing and delivering food. Rosenfeld also married a woman he met at art school and they had two daughters together, but the marriage didn't last. All the while, Rosenfeld continued creating art.

His first break came in 1980 when he convinced Ivan Karp, owner of the OK Harris Gallery in Soho, to show some of his large minimalist paintings. Karp's support immediately brought in buyers and also helped Rosenfeld get shows elsewhere.

Rosenfeld has lived in Lower Manhattan for over 40 years and can't imagine living



One of Rosenfeld's railroad drawings, on display now at the Van Der Plas Gallery.

elsewhere.

"Why did I stay?" he said, echoing a reporter's query. "It was never a question of that."

Rosenfeld lived and worked on Forsyth St. between Broome and Grand Sts. from 1958 until 1991. The neighborhood inspired his "hookers and pimps" series in the 1980s, when the material was literally on his doorstep.

"Day and night we had hookers," Rosenfeld said, cracking a smile. "The hookers were alright, but the pimps could be pretty rough."

Rosenfeld frequently saw prostitutes and johns, including a rabbi one time having sex in Sara D. Roosevelt Park across the street from his apartment.

Rosenfeld had a standing joke with the prostitutes who hung out in front of his apartment.

"One of them would come over to me and she'd grab me — by the balls — and she'd say, 'How 'bout a date, Pop?'" Rosenfeld said, laughing. "And they'd all wait for me [to respond] and I would say, 'Stay cool baby.' Every morning. And they would all start laughing — that was like the morning joke."

The neighborhood changed when Chinese

immigrants arrived in droves. More children were around and the prostitutes disappeared. Rosenfeld's landlord tried to throw him out, but he won a court battle to stay.

Still, when Rosenfeld married for the second time in 1991, he realized it was time to move. Hoffman, his new wife, deserved better quarters than a shared hallway bathroom, and they settled on a live/work space in the Financial District, where they have lived ever since.

The rabbi who married the couple asked why they didn't just move up to Hoffman's apartment on E. 79th St.

Rosenfeld explained his reasoning: "I got five grapefruits for a dollar Downtown," he recalled telling the rabbi. "You had to spend a dollar to get one grapefruit in her neighborhood Uptown. The rabbi said, 'Oh, I understand.'"

Rosenfeld's work is on display at the Van Der Plas Gallery on Pier 17 through Aug. 28, open 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily (vanderplasmagallery.com, 212-227-8983).