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Hanging Papers

Art On the Tracks.

Leonard Rosenfeld Catches the Trains.



Leonard Rosenfeld (1926–2009), *Funeral Near the Tracks*, 1957, crayon on paper, 24 x 38 inches

Leonard Rosenfeld was a street-wise student at Tilden High in East Flatbush, Brooklyn when Uncle Sam invited him to come see the world — or at least the Pacific theater of World War II. His mother did her tearful best to get Len out of it, but he leaned into the “three squares” that military service offered — nutritional security that he hadn’t enjoyed at home, at least since his father’s sudden death a few years prior. But see the world Len did, and his reminiscences are filled with observations that underscore his youth and innocence. He later recalled with perplexity the discovery that the army was racially segregated; he recoiled from the revelation of the power of the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan. And somewhere along the line, he discovered something about himself: he would be an artist.

(This discovery came in part because the “brass” discovered it as well: Rosenfeld had decorated a warehouse at which he was in charge of procurement with pornographic drawings — and the very same brass soon became his first collectors).¹

Having given his college years to the war effort, Rosenfeld returned to civilian life with GI Bill money to study. While he later regretted not taking the opportunity to study in Paris, he felt at the time that New York was the place to be — the new center of the art world. He had good reason to think so: recently liberated Paris had shed many of its artists during the war, and France’s loss was America’s gain. Moreover, a rising generation of dealers were joining the ranks of extant modern art galleries in New York, and America’s new MFA system was training a new generation of artists and art historians.

Rosenfeld quickly met others who made the same calculation, including Edsel Cramer (1924-2010). Cramer was a Black artist from Texas, and had also found himself as an artist during the war. They couldn’t have met during the war, but Rosenfeld and Cramer ran parallel tracks:

“They realized, ‘Here’s a man who’s got talent for drawing.’ So they give me a project like painting numbers on chicken coops. That’s the funniest thing in the world.”²

Chicken coops and lewd warehouse drawings — humble origins, but the two were drawn to enroll not at the Sorbonne, but at the Art Students League of New York. They became studio mates, Cramer even introducing Rosenfeld to his first wife. And though the path was parallel, they were an odd couple — Rosenfeld and Cramer, that is — Len an expressionist and Cramer a portraitist in a very tight manner. But this diversity was typical of the League in those years: the pedagogy was traditional, with artists learning life drawing and anatomy in the mode that had been taught for hundreds of years — but the faculty at that time included modernists and urban realists, far far afield from the classical mode. Cramer felt pressured there to paint in a “primitive” manner because he was Black, and in fact there was a strong preference for a “primitive” treatment of form in many instructors, from Yasuo Kuniyoshi to John Corbino — both of whom instructed Rosenfeld.

The League launched Cramer in one direction, Rosenfeld in another. Cramer became tighter and more virtuosic in his realism, and returned to Houston to paint the portraits of national leaders. Rosenfeld stayed on in his hometown and became more modern, more adroitly expressive. But these opposing concerns highlight just how open the question was: if New York was a new art world capitol, what was New York’s art to be?

Rosenfeld always followed his own course, but moving to a studio downtown, he fell in with another crowd trying to blaze its own trail into the wilderness of modern art. By the 1950s, Rosenfeld was a regular at the Cedar Tavern, the famous hangout of Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and the rest of the Abstract Expressionist gang. He broke up brawls — and may have joined a few — between de Kooning and the critic Clement Greenberg. At issue— apart from sports, money, and politics — was how to paint. Pollock’s total abstraction ruled the day, but Rosenfeld held out: he was always painting *something*.

In 1956, Pollock was on the cover of *Time*, and then he was gone, dying behind the wheel. Rosenfeld turned, shortly thereafter, to an explosive series of drawings taking the open-air train tracks and construction sites of the outer boroughs as his subject. Looking west from the Marcy Avenue stop on the JMZ line in Brooklyn; scanning a railyard in Queens. They are identifiable subjects, legible today because train lines are the last part of civic

architecture to change. But their immediacy also bespeaks the intensity and energy with which they were executed. Their compositions are “all over” in the AbEx mode, and the dense black crayon in which they are limned must have made Franz Kline’s mouth water. The timelessness and pathos of Rothko and Pollock are strangely manifested in this dynamic but essentially unchanging urban scene. In one work, the ragged lines of the railroad tracks are surrounded by more static uprights of headstones: *Funeral Near the Tracks*.

Rosenfeld’s career went on another five decades, but the railroad drawings ended that year. They caught the eye of the dealer Martha Jackson who showed them the following year, and the Brooklyn Museum shined a spotlight on them in the 1960s. But by then, Rosenfeld had moved on, to the next station.

Thanks for reading,

Jonathan

1 According to an unpublished manuscript by the artist’s widow, Janet Hoffman.

2 As quoted from a 2006 interview with Cramer — [full recording here](#).

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