

"Family with Sparkle Plenty," 1949, gouache on board, The Carnegie Museum of Art

All an Illusion, But Maybe Not So

By Henry Koerner

Introduction by Paul Roberts, Editor

HENRY Koerner lives in Pittsburgh but grew up in Vienna during Adolph Hitler's rise to power and the economic and social turmoil that gripped Europe between the wars. A unique city in a unique period, the Austrian capital seemed to comprise equal parts of opulence and desperation, terror and intellectual achievement.

The city was previously inclined, for by the turn of the century it had become a "center for painters dealing with extravagant, grotesque, and fantastic themes," observes Gail Stavitsky, an assistant curator at the Carnegie's Museum of Art in Pittsburgh in 1983 who wrote about Koerner in a catalogue that accompanied an exhibition of his paintings. In *From Vienna to Pittsburgh, the Art of Henry Koerner*, Stavitsky traced Koerner's life from his birth in 1915 to Viennese middle-class Jewish parents. He escaped the Nazi terror by fleeing to Italy in

1938, never seeing his parents again, and emigrated a year later to New York, where he worked as a graphic designer specializing in book jacket covers. During the war, Koerner worked in the U.S. Office of War Information, and, at the urging of American painter and co-worker Ben Shahn, taught himself to paint. Living in New York right after the war, Koerner became immensely popular, both among critics, who called him an "arresting talent," as well as among a wide slice of the public not schooled in art appreciation. His paintings, Stavitsky observes, were popular because the "public had no difficulty grasping their message. The objects in them were recognizable, and the situations, while bizarre, usually suggested a clear narrative or moral structure."

Perhaps due mostly to his young age during Vienna's most tumultuous years, Koerner was more a spectator than a participant, "although he was certainly influenced by the cultural climate of questioning, challenge and uncertainty," Stavitsky writes. "He himself attaches deep significance to his Viennese heritage, believing that it gave him a sense of what he expresses as the inherent duality of life." Koerner's career is distinguished by work influenced by both major Viennese art camps of his early life. He dislikes such labels, but his early art is said to be generally from the realist school while his later paintings show an impressionistic style.

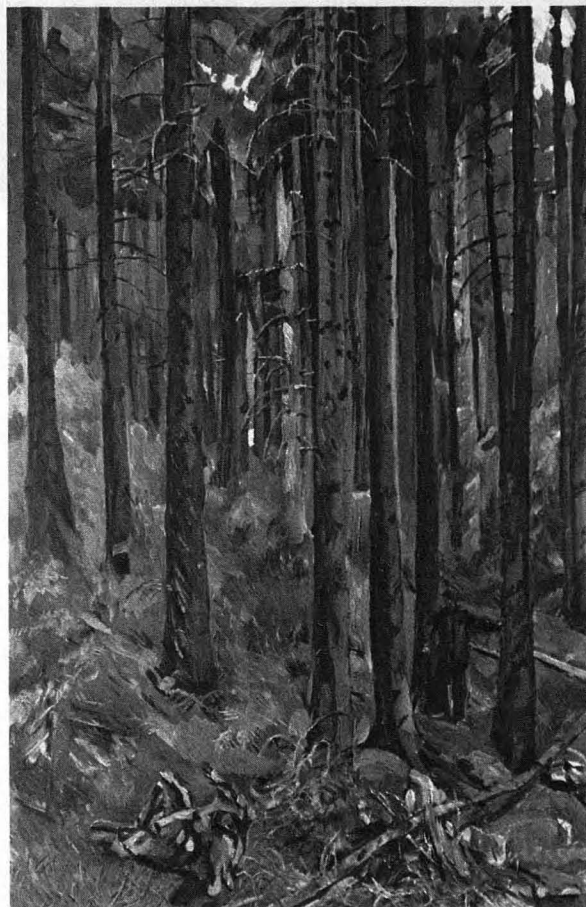
Discussion of his brand of dualism, Viennese culture, and his interest in how art historians and critics should classify his work dominate the following memoir. He eventually focuses on his years in Pittsburgh, which for almost four decades have supplied him with ideas and images for his paintings. Living quite comfortably at age 74, Koerner and his wife reside in the East End. He still paints.

*Because Koerner began his career in America as a graphic designer, we asked him to return to his artistic roots here in **Pittsburgh History**. The graphic design you see in this article is his own. The typeface differs from all other articles in the magazine because he chose his favorite, called Optima. An exhibition, "Henry Koerner: The Altar Piece and New Paintings," runs November 4-29 at Concept Art Gallery, 1031 S. Braddock Avenue in Regent Square.*

A gentleman moves into a room on the fourth floor of an apartment building. From his window he can glance across the street into an empty

dwelling. One day he perceives there a spider sitting on the window sill. As the gentleman casually moves his fingers, he seems to notice that the spider imitates his movement with his legs. From then on it becomes a game. The gentleman drums out the most intricate rhythms which the spider imitates, until one day the gentleman discovers, to his horror, that the spider does not imitate him but that, to the contrary, he imitates the spider. The game continues, now in reverse. One day the spider wraps a piece of yarn around its neck, which the gentleman imitates with a rope. You guessed the outcome of the story. One day the gentleman is found dead, hung by his neck. This tale was told to us children by our unmarried Aunt Selma.

My brother and I were born into rooms on the fourth floor of an apartment building on *Am Tabor* 13 on one of Vienna's streets. Today we have an apartment in Vienna one block from my place of



"Fir Tree Forest," oil on canvas, 1989



"The Paradise," oil on canvas, 1989

birth, in the same physical position. Here in Pittsburgh our house is perched on a hill, overlooking rooftops, steeples, smokestacks, blast furnaces, chestnut trees, surrounding hills and bridges — half a ferris wheel.

In Vienna I also could see half of the giant ferris wheel sticking out above the chestnut trees in the *Prater*. From our iron-barred window in our children's room, we could overlook not only the ferris wheel, but also cupolas and steeples of the city and the mountains of the Vienna woods. There beneath the chestnut trees runs the *Prater's* main *allée*, accompanied by four parallel walkways, four kilometers long. To both sides of these rigid straight lanes is a labyrinth of paths through the thicket of the woods. These lonely trails are used by all kinds of people, like bird watchers, flower pickers, frog catchers, swamp fishers, mushrooms, sex seekers and finders, prostitutes, homosexuals, masturbators, to mention just a few. There are also coffeehouses, restaurants, race tracks, nudist colonies, swimming holes, soccer, cricket, tennis

and hockey fields. Also just rolling meadows, where the Jews in November of 1938 were driven by the government to wash the earth and eat grass to the amusement of the population. Around the foot of this giant ferris wheel lies appropriately the amusement park with its clatter of jarring music. The blinking dragon emerges from the dripping cave pulling behind him his tail of trains. It has passed the sweetness of familiar fairytales and seen the horrors of Sodom and Gomorrah. There is the carousel throwing its vulgar chamber pots toward the sky. Next to it, the innocent pony ride. The giant ever-turning Kalafatti, the Chinaman, with blinking jewels on his chest, holding up a roof with his pigtail head of another merry-go-round. The puppet show has come to the end, and a little white bunny swings toward the yelling children. In this row is also the ventriloquist insulting the ladies in the audience with his "Maxi". The Watschiman dummy is getting punched in the face, moans like a cow. Attracting the attention silently is a familiar scene. The abducted beauty in the arms of the baboon, his head and eyes turning ferociously from side to side. The transparent veils of the beauty quiver on her heaving breasts. Behind this group, through glass-paneled doors of the wax museum, sinister and alluring, one can catch glimpses of naked human forms, monster babies, skin diseases, and a cross-section of the reproductive organs. A man has his nose growing out of the flesh of his overhead bent arm. I truly wanted to become a barker at one of these sideshows when grown up. Of all the attractions we liked best were stage settings behind glass — that started to come to life by throwing in a penny, until that dreaded moment came when all was quiet again.

I remember walking through the city with my father. He was an excellent draftsman and photographer. In his spare time he built for us two children the most beautiful doll houses with glass windows, curtains, and miniature Persian rugs, silverware and dishes. For the famous art historical museum we walked toward the middle of the city. For the poor industrial section he was drawn to, we walked the opposite direction. This was the section of the "proletariat." It started right behind our house. Again the *Am Tabor* had become the dividing line between the "haves" and "have nots," between the middle class and the proletariat.

There is still a duty house standing there hundreds of years old, between the east and the west of the world. Between the Turks, the Huns, the Mongols, Genghis Khan and the Christian world.

On the hand of my father we walked towards the rushing Danube River. On its banks were cranes, industrial plants, warehouses. Connecting them was the Danube bank train, used only for transporting freight. Today one of these huge warehouses is converted into an elegant Swedish Hotel. It is not allowed to open yet, as it does not adhere to Vienna's inundating codes.

I recently painted a watercolor of a warehouse of the same dimension. This one lies on Pittsburgh's South Side and will serve as a stage setting for a large oil painting of a dog show.

For as an exile and orphan, he knows that it may be necessary to disassemble his images, to pack up his paintings, and with the boy in the foreground flee the scene.

So writes my son, Joseph, about me and my 16-panel painting "Oh, Fearful Wonder of Man." And so in the summer of 1952 I packed up my paintings again, and with the boy in the foreground, fled the scene. I left behind my ocean, my Coney Island, my Brooklyn, my State Street, for Pittsburgh. Following "my spider". The reason for my leaving New York was obviously financial. But maybe not so. Alan Cruskin of the Midtown Galleries had talked to me advisingly, "Henry, you better take this Artist-in-Residence position in Pittsburgh. It doesn't look too good for you sales-wise in our gallery anymore".

I had come before through Pittsburgh a few times. The encounter with this city was on my cross country trips by bus when I was going skiing in Aspen, Colorado, and on visits to San Francisco. What I perceived of Pittsburgh instantly was a profound attraction to its cubistic extensions, the stage-settings. By this I mean a distribution of cubistic forms large and small, ups and downs. Reminiscent of my visit in 1937 as a student to Split, Yugoslavia, on a hitchhiking trip. This cubistic extension has in its heart deepest sentiment and love that goes out towards you, so that you have to love it back.

I had left the city of my triumph, New York, as a defeated victor. I had entered Pittsburgh as a nationally famous failure. A vicious friend remarked to me then: "Big fish in a small pond".

What I did not fathom is that I would find my future wife Joanie here. A beautiful girl, with beautiful long blond hair, beautiful blue eyes, and a beautiful behind. She was a violin music student

at the Pennsylvania College for Women. I did not fathom also that I would have two beautiful children with her. But maybe not so. It was prophesied to me in a supercilious card-reading in Des Moines that I was going to marry a girl with a violin. All marriages are crystalizations of two people, embodied in Grecian mythology by Philemon and Baucis. But as Dr. Mullins from the University of Pittsburgh pointed out to me: "In crystalization mistakes are made. Sometimes crystals do not come out right". So it is with marriages. I am still married to Joanie, my second wife.

But why do I write? My deceased master in Vienna, Victor Theodore Slama, once said, "Painting and writing go hand in hand".

First. Alexander Eliot wrote about me, "His shield against indifference became an antic mask: Harpo Marx brandishing a megaphone".

Second. I love to write about my favorite subject, myself.

Third. I am writing to set the record straight. But maybe not so. In an exhibition of 1980 at the Westmoreland Museum of Art in Greensburg, I showed a 16-panel painting, "The Uncanny Canininess". Lovers — he black, she white — lying and floating together in air. She holds a switchblade towards the black's back; he loses daisies out of his right hand. Beneath the couple flow a river around a cold wintery bend. Until then, all other artists were my contemporaries, my peers. Now as I entered the show and saw my painting, a strange sensation came over me. I felt distinctly like a wanderer in the mountain above the timberline. I felt that I had nothing to do with my peers, my contemporaries, nor anything to do with any living painter. The same inkling I had at a poster competition 40 years ago. I knew then that nobody of the other artists had a chance of winning first prize once my idea had crystalized in my mind. Years ago Alexander Eliot remarked about my drawings that they would only be compared with the allness of the drawings of Albrecht Dürer.

When I looked at my 25-piece watercolor "Pappageno, The Birdman", suddenly it occurred to me that the cubist attempts of Picasso, Braque, and Delauney were solved by this painting. When a 16-paneled oil painting, "The Bathers", was hanging on the wall, suddenly I knew that I had out-painted Cézanne, just as Cézanne had out-painted Pissaro.

With my *Time* cover portraits I found myself in the company of Eakins, Velasquez, El Greco and Holbein. Standing among my watercolor paint-

ings on exhibition, I had the knowledge that there was no one in the whole history of art who could match my painting output in quantity and quality. Effortless I seem to breeze through the gardens grown so laboriously by Kandinsky, Matisse, Picasso, Manet, Monet, Corot, DeKoonig, Hoffman, Kline and Rothko. I had joined myself to the immortals of the *Kunsthistorischen Museum*. I had entered the Vienna Museum from the back door. But maybe not so. On a Frankstown Road corner, with a statue of a World War I soldier, I am completely immersed in the dialogue between the "I" and the "Thou". A man catches me unaware, scaring the shit out of me. "Sir, that's very nice what you are doing. But then, of course, I am the greatest painter of you all"! he says.

I had finished a portrait of a businessman here in Pittsburgh. After a few days I had given it to him, his relatives, and friends to look at. He called me, "Henry, I want you to take out the blue under my chin". If I would have agreed and taken out the blue brushstroke, the man would have seen an orange spot, then again a green spot, then a purple spot, and so on until the canvas would have been white again.

The whole incident is an illustration of *all an illusion, but maybe not so*. There is my illusion that I build up the painting, color stroke by color stroke, with the hope of celebrating the Living God. There is the businessman tearing my painting apart brushstroke by brushstroke until there is nothing left anymore, neither of the painting, nor of himself.

There lies a deep disenchantment with God as the creator of the universe, and man at the base of the climate of the twentieth century. The painters, superficially called "Impressionists", saw the universe and man in terms of Darwin. Man derived from the baboon, a product of evolution, spelled out in evolutionary color brushstrokes — man not necessarily a creation of God. Like a romantic American attracted by Zen, the romantic Gauguin tried to find God in the primitive culture of Tahiti. Cézanne, the realist, was in his brushstrokes a Darwinist, but he also believed in western God. He foresaw and warned against the "atomizing" of the world, as Kandinsky, Miro, Pollock, DeKoonig and their ilk did. Cézanne, the genius, acts out Martin Buber's sentence: the dialogue between the I and the Thou, between Man and his God. There is no contradiction between Darwin's evolution of Man and God's creation. There is no

contradiction between accident and destiny. The question of which is right, is the answer. This simultaneity is obvious in the German proverbs, "*Ein Jeder ist seines Glückes Schmied*", and "*Der Mensch denkt and Gott lenkt*" which mean, "Everybody is the architect of his own future", and "Man proposes, God disposes".

Marxism and National Socialism paint man's paradise on earth. An artist of "Modern Art" is like a gentleman in Aunt Selma's tale who thinks the spider imitates him. There is Cézanne, there is Modern Art, and there is Henry Koerner on the end again. ■



"Junkyard," 1948-49, oil on masonite, The Carnegie Museum of Art