

# Sidney Gross

*Like most young artists during the Depression, Sidney Gross' early style was influenced by the social realism encouraged by the WPA prominent art schools like Cooper Union and the Arts Students League. He also drew on the surrealist movement that was just beginning the year he was born. By the time he was twenty, he was painting distinctively urban surrealism, while producing critically admired portraits, something he continued to do during his lifetime. Late in the 1940s and early into the 1950s, he experimented with various forms of abstract expressionism, including what one critic called amorphism. These soft, diffuse often numbered abstractions bore the title 'Dusky' or 'Amorphic'. He continued to produce realistic portraits and semi-abstract portraits of the landscape of New York City. By the mid 1950s, he was producing large and dynamic works of Abstract Expressionism, and finding a clientele at a time others were not, when other Ab Ex artists were forced to band together to exhibit. Around 1960, his UFO and Probe Series began to include controlled abstractions against hard edge geometric fields of colors. At his premature death, he set expressionistic forms in a wide bands of colors, separated by a white field.*

*Throughout his relatively short career, he received critical acclaim and financial success. It is our hope and intent to reclaim the reputation of an artist who was allowed to sink into obscurity for reasons that had nothing to do with his art.*

## The Early Years

Sidney was born in New York City February 9, 1921 the third child to Polish immigrants Morris (1890-1972) and Esther Gross (1890-1974). He had two sisters, three-year old Mae (Mazie) and seven year old Sylvia (1914-1996). The 1930 census lists the family living in Passaic, New Jersey with Esther's parents Harry and Dora Nusenberg. Shortly afterwards, the family moved to the Bronx where they were still living together at the time of the 1940 census.

Sidney began painting seriously at age 11 while attending PS 30 in the Bronx, though he may have been awarded "5 points" for his illustrations submitted to the *Junior Eagle* in Brooklyn when he was 8 and then again he next year. His first recorded sale, a sketch of Huey Long (1893-1935), was to the *Patterson Morning Call* when he was 13, probably in response to Long's planned challenge to FDR whom Long had supported in 1932, but whom Long felt had abandoned his progressive base.

When Sidney arrived at Evander Childs High School in the Bronx, his talent must have been recognized early, because he was named Art Editor for the school's national prize-winning literary and art magazine, *The Bridge*, an unheard of position for a

freshman. He continued as Art Editor for his entire four years. The school provided an unusually rich artistic climate. Well-known muralist James Newell (1900-1985) began work in 1935, the year Sidney arrived, on his landmark WPA commission 'Evolution of Western Civilization,' a still-surviving series of frescoes in the school's library (fig. 1). He didn't complete the mural until 1938. Sidney Gross must have been one of the students Newell describes who "stopped to ask questions and inform each other about the art process and the meaning of each section. They recognized events, criticized the knot in the cowboy's scarf and the proportion of the mechanic's hand." Sidney's 1937 drawing *Beachcombers* (fig 2) and 1938 *Refugees* that were reproduced in *The Bridge* show some influence of James Newell. Both these illustrations are in the Smithsonian collection. 'Conversation', a small edition undated woodblock print probably dates from days at Evander Childs.

Gross's early works reflect the bleak times, combining images of the lingering depression and the clouds of impending war. Fellow student, later author and activist Grace Paley (1922-2004), a year younger than Sidney, described the scholastic and cultural climate of the school:

Laurence Stallings's great warning book, *The First World War* ... ends with Hitler, Mussolini, Ataturk and Stalin in powerful shooting poses. The rest of the pictures of that terrible war made my friends and me sign the Oxford pledge never to go to war ... then it was 1937 and Ernest Hemingway, among other young Americans and Europeans, went to Spain. ... Germany and Russia experimented on the body of Spain with all sorts of new equipment they might need in a more serious war. ... In my high school, Evander Childs, we held many rallies and demonstrations. We wept for Spain and wrote poems.

New York Times - 1/25/98

Many of those poems she refers to undoubtedly ended up in *The Bridge*. As a young Jew, Gross whose parents had immigrated from Poland must have been painfully aware of the effects of the rise of Hitler across the sea. Wikipedia states, "Martin Gilbert writes that no event in the history of German Jews between 1933 and 1945 was so widely reported as it was happening, and the accounts from the foreign journalists working in Germany sent shock waves around the world. The *New York Times* [reported] at the time: 'No foreign propagandist bent upon blackening Germany before the world could outdo the tale of burnings and beatings, of blackguardly assaults on defenseless and innocent people, which disgraced that country yesterday.'"

Meanwhile, under the tutelage of his art teacher and adviser to *The Bridge*, Francis Taylor, young Sidney won recognition in a 1939 citywide art contest and garnered his first mention in the *New York Times* that year. Proud of her son, his mother asked the following year to meet Miss Taylor, while his father "wondered about this woman who helps my son to complete monstrosities." Sidney's portrait (fig. ) of his father shows his father in deep shadow.

## Art Students League

Sidney graduated in 1939 and began his studies at the Art Students League on a scholarship. Gross was able to attend the Art Students League on scholarships through 1942. In 1940, he was one of six national winners in a competition sponsored by the Art Students League, and in the following years received the Daniel Schnackenberg scholarship.

The year he began his studies at the League, Franco won the Spanish Civil War; Hitler signed pacts with Italy; Stalin attacked Finland; Japan invaded China; Germany annexed the last of the Czech territories and attacked Poland. Closer to home, Jewish refugees on the German transatlantic liner, the St. Louis, were denied entry to the United States with fateful results. World War II began in Europe. It was also, however, Hollywood's Golden Year and the year of the New York World's Fair. There, the Jewish Palestine Pavilion introduced the concept of a modern Jewish state and its monumental relief sculpture glorified 'The Scholar, the Laborer, and the Toiler of the Soil.'

Sidney's paintings continued to reflect the mood of the times. At the League, he studied under Jon Corbino, Arnold Blanch, Morris Kantor, and George Picken. His early work, already leaning that way, reflected the strong social realism of Corbino and Blanch, but his own sense of the surreal, the strong abstract compositions of George Picken, and the soon-to-come postwar explosion of abstract-expressionism drove his stylistic development, if not the content, of his work.

Other teachers at the school whose art he would have become familiar with include Will Barnet (1911-2009) George Grosz (1893-1959), Jean Charlot (1898-1979), Ernest Fiene (1894-1965), Yasuo Kuniyoshi (193-1953), Raphael Soyer (1899-1987), Harry Sternberg (1904-2001), and William Zorach (1897-1966). It is clear, even in these student years, that Sidney was beginning to move in less "traditional" aesthetics."

During his first semester at the League, he wrote Miss Taylor that he had developed "a waterwash technique ... having all the precision and clarity of my oils. They smack of Blake in medium and execution." (Fig ) These are remarkable and often surrealist paintings (Fig ) and seem to evoke Pieter Breughel the Younger with their dark visions, and the images of tortured naked humans that suggest the herding of Jews into the concentration camps. (Fig). They reflect what critic Gary Comenas in *Abstract Expressionism* had headlined: "1939 - The Surrealistic Invasion Begins."

While still a student at the League, Gross exhibited at the National Academy, the New York Watercolor Club and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, venues that indicate his growing talent and mastery. He found these years both fulfilling and challenging. Working on a mural in 1940, he wrote that he felt "the same way I did when I received my first fire engine." His hopes for an Abby prize and for one from the Art Institute of Chicago did not materialize, but he was proud that "Corbino chose [his]

painting ... as the most interesting character study of the term, hanging it in the student concourse.”

## The Art World 1939-41

1939 was a tumultuous year. The Federal Art Program was reorganized under WPA and its many artistic programs were winding down. Mark Rothko was among those dropped. In the meantime, around him the New York art scene was undergoing a revolution, of which he was surely aware. In May 1930, the Museum of Non-Objective Art opened, financed by and drawn from the collection of Simon Guggenheim, which included Arp, Kandinsky, Chagall, Moholy-Nagy, and the more traditional Vlaminck. Picasso's *Guernica* was exhibited at the Valentine Dudensing Gallery. DeKooning was moved to paint a tribute to it. Adolph Gottlieb painted a series of Surrealist sea still lifes, inspired by de Chirico's metaphysical paintings. Ben-Zion, Ilya Bolotowsky, David Burliuk, Earl Kerkam, Ralph Rosenborg, Marcus Rothkowitz [Mark Rothko], Louis Shanker and Joseph Solman. Karl Knaths and Jean Libert, members of *The Ten* held their final exhibition and broke up.

The year 1940 was no different. Perhaps most notable about these two years was the turmoil and outrage from the American and international artists over the advance of the Nazis. Paris fell, and, perhaps as a result, the number of art galleries in Manhattan more than tripled.

The young Gross may have had an influence on at least one of his fellow students. Richard Ericson (1922-2010) who entered the Art Students League in 1941, runner up to the scholarship award Sidney had won the previous year, seems to have drawn on Sidney's Blakean nudes in his post war work, before Erikson turned to more traditional and lucrative land and townscapes. Fellow students who went on to successful careers included, William Blackburn (1920-2002), Seong Moy (1921-), Michael Ponce de Leon (1922-), and Charles White (1918-1979).

The well known Jewish Czech artist Terry Haas (1923-), a winner of the Art Students League scholarship in 1941 moved to full blown abstraction earlier than Sidney, and her dramatic thrusting forms find echoes in Sidney's work. As a survivor of the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia and then France, she became active in preserving the history of the Holocaust, something that moved Sidney in the immediate post war years. Like Sidney, she was to become influenced by the theories of Albert.

In his personal life, Sidney wrote of his adolescent turmoil between his "libido", "states of indulgences" and a desire for "asceticism ... not the fanatic variety, the outgrowth of religious fervor tempered by logic and a sense of humor." He had an intense interest in Freudian psychoanalysis that continued unabated for years. His paintings and writings demonstrated his intense sense of social justice. He mused about

science and metaphysics and the insignificance of Man. In frustration or in reaction to world events, he ended one letter to Miss Taylor with this statement: "To hell with being considerate, with being practical and economical ... the only way anything accomplishes anything is by being egotistic, ruthless and damn selfish." It would appear, however, that he lived his life in denial of that creed.

## **Army Experience**

Gross received his draft notice for the Army in 1941. A number of New York artists applied for Conscientious Objector status in 1941-42, and a "Sidney Gross" appears in a list from the period in ACLU records. The roughly 25,000 conscientious objectors who took the option of serving in the medical corps or in a non-combatant role. Sidney Gross enlisted November 28, 1942, listing two years college and employment as a clerk and was assigned to a non-combatant role suitable to his artistic ability, map-making. It seems reasonable that they are one in the same person.

It began a trying period for him, judging by his later artistic reaction to the war and some of his surviving letters to his art teacher. Two dated works from 1941, his surrealistic lithographs, 'Lamentations' and 'Technological Directions' (Fig 4) in the Block Museum of Northwestern University, show contorted human forms trapped in mechanistic torture.

In November 1942, he wrote Miss Taylor of a consciousness-altering experience at training camp that clearly grew out a depression that included suicide as a possibility. The result, he said was that "three weeks ago I was approaching in a most lethargic manner the absurdity of suicide. Today, in true strong fashion, I'm happier than I've ever been in my entire life." It was not clear what that experience was, but it may have had to do with his enlistment. A month later he would write of a dramatic epiphany on Christmas Day 1942 (see page 49). His third wife, Elaine kept in her collection two paintings (Fig 9) with seemingly Christian iconography and several early abstracts that also seem to include crucifixes. There is, however, little indication that religion, either Jewish or Christian, played little role in his life.

His résumé in the Smithsonian, prepared by Elaine, incorrectly lists his discharge from the army as 1945, while, in fact, Gross was honorably discharged in 1943 "because of a medical condition." After basic training, he had served for less than a year in the Maps and Charts division preparing training material. Since there was no indication of physical disability, his alternating mental states of depression and elation, which seem to have followed him much of his life, may have been a factor. Neuropsychiatric medical discharges were not that unusual in WWII (69,394 for the duration of the war).

Before the war ended, Sidney took a job selling art supplies for E.H. & A.C. Friedrichs Co., a major manufacturer of art canvas and boards, with stores on East

28th, East 43rd, and West 57th streets, as well as in Newark. The upside of the job was that it probably kept him supplied with materials to pursue his career through some tough years. Miss Taylor also helped him out with several loans and by buying a number of his paintings.

In the years that followed the war, the country as whole rejoiced in the victory over Hitler, and the American art world was vibrant. Many artists worked together, exchanged ideas, lived and drank together, but Sidney seems notably absent from any memoirs, despite the clear artistic success and even notoriety he was to enjoy. Did a self-perceived failure to have been a part of that struggle contribute to an apparent distance or aloofness from his fellow artists, many of whom he must have known? In the years that followed, Sidney was to become a popular teacher, involved with his students on a personal level, named the most popular teacher, but there is scant mention of involvement with any of his peers, strange given his own stylistic development. A relative related an oft-repeated comment from the artist that he consciously avoided the “art scene.”

Within a few years, a national witch-hunt began for communists and communist sympathizers, ironic, given the still fresh memories of the Nazis. Jews and artists were again unevenly targeted. Sidney was of Jewish heritage and a successful artist, but he does not seem to have been affected by the McCarthy era, perhaps because there is no evidence of political activity until long after his censure in 1954.

## **Marriage to Kay**

In 1944, Sidney married Kay who was several years his senior. A wonderful group of undated somewhat clumsy, but not devoid of ability, captioned ink drawings, undoubtedly by Kay (fig), paint a happy picture of their early marriage. She was frequently a subject of his paintings, often in “his chair”, smoking or reading. (fig) In these depictions, he is clearly quite young and slim with a full head of hair. He apparently had a commission to illustrate a children’s books, she refers to in several titles, in one case “drawing a wheelbarrow detail for *Children’s Song*,” which appears to have been the title of one such book. What comes through these drawings is the picture of a wife supportive of her husband’s determination to make a living in a demanding and often disappointing occupation. That is borne out in a much later letter from a patron written to “Dear Sidney and Kay” that invites them both to visit.

Many of these drawings have descriptive, often humorous titles (next page). In sheer number, the most common subject is Sidney at work, sometimes in his favorite easy chair, sketching or working on a large canvass on an easel, sometimes “Sidney working in the studio sitting on the painting chair,” a wooden kitchen chair. She writes: “Mr. Gross gets engrossed ... Sidney & the muse at work ... Sidney building his dreams again, ... grinding paint ... working on Children’s Songs.”

Hints of frustration creep in when she titles one diptych “Marvin’s Speedgraphic intrudes on a Sunday breakfast” and another of his working entitled “Saturday Nite Fling!” Another drawing is titled “Sidney reading to delay a Sat Nite bath.” More than the domestic touches, appreciation for his work comes through in so many drawings. “We’re both getting tired, but don’t give up” ... “Looking at a night’s work” ... “Now let’s see what I’ve painted.”

Their apartment on the top floor of 55 West 95th Street looked out on the roof (now a common roof-top terrace) from “our kitchen & privy.” From the roof, they had a view of the city skyline beyond. Their building was described in a 2009 real estate ad as one of three “impressive pre-war buildings that maintain a strong presence on charming tree-lined streets one block from Central Park. The neighboring low-lying townhouses provide virtually all of the individual apartments with abundant natural light and vibrant views allowing residents to take in all of the appealing characteristics that are unique to the Upper West Side.” No wonder that Sidney kept the apartment even as he became financially successful, though rent control may have become its major appeal at some point.

Their living room, “our most lived in room with a couch cover I actually managed to sew up myself,” was also their bedroom and the couch was actually a double bed. His studio, though an archway, was probably originally intended as the bedroom.

A radio and a double gourd bottle that figure in several of his early paintings are clearly depicted in her drawing. Kay drew a lot of details of the rooms and his adjacent studio: “Sidney’s Easy Chair waiting for him” or when occupied by Sidney “stop[ing] for a Bailey tune” and pensively smoking: “time out for coffin nailing.”

They both smoked, apparently heavily. One of Sidney’s portraits shows his wife, hair up in curlers curled in that chair enjoying a cigarette. One drawing depicts them “all jumbled up” in the Jumble Shop, the storied Tea House and taproom in the West Village, and a former speakeasy. Simone de Beauvoir described it in *America Day by Day* as looking “almost European with its red tiled floor and its quiet little tables arrayed along the walls. You can eat and drink there all night.” There’s a drawing of them in a fancy railroad dining car, and drawings of interactions with friends, including a number of drawings of a woman named Marion, who may have served as a model, judging by the resemblance to one of his paintings entitled “Model Taking a Break.”

Eventually, Gross rented additional studio space in Chelsea, but he never gave up the apartment. He kept both it and his second larger Chelsea Park studio when he began teaching in Baltimore in the late 1960s where he rented yet another apartment, perhaps without Kay’s knowledge. After Kay died, his third wife Elaine called the New York City apartment home until she died in 2009, 40 years after Sidney’s death. She, also did not appear to have been aware of the Baltimore apartment, since after his

death, many of his paintings were abandoned there and sold to pay back rent.

## Auspicious Beginnings

In 1945, he was hailed as a “new exhibitor at Contemporary Art.” The officers and trustees there wrote, “The intelligence and imagination seen in Mr. Gross’ work give promise that he is worthy to be added to [our] roster of artists.” He attracted notice from a number of critics and publications, remarkable for a young artist in the new capital of the Art World.

Gross received excellent reviews in the *New York World Telegram* and *Art News*, whose critic wrote: His paintings “are annealed by a nervous and electric quality that is most interesting ... highly sensitive and competent ... The landscape ‘Abandoned’ is remarkable for its haunting suggestion.” His prices ranged from \$75-350 (equivalent to \$950-\$4500 in 2012).

The following month, critic Margaret Breuning headlined her story: “Gross Rings Bell” and in it wrote that he “has in the popular phrase ‘got something’.” She seemed pleased that he showed “not a trace of influences” from his teachers at the Art Students League, “but appears decidedly on his own in his imaginative designs and tactful use of luscious pigment.” (Fig)

The *New York Times* distinguished art critic Howard Devree wrote of that first show: “Sidney Gross gives evidence of estimable qualities, including imagination and a real sense of paint ‘feel.’ Still in his early twenties, Gross is busily assimilating a mixture of rather diverse styles.” Devree assessed his portraits as “honest and well individualized. There are good movement and rhythm in his forms.” His conclusion was that Sidney Gross “has his own vision, however, and, already, no mean equipment for future development.” His surrealist imagery, often executed in watercolor, incorporated almost organic urban decay anticipating descriptions of science fiction writer Philip K. Dick and cinematic landscapes of Ridley Scott.

The *Art Digest* critic and Devree cited Gross’ emotive and expressive ‘Derelict’ and ‘Ecce Homo’, which in a later review, Devree noted, “is a bitter comment on the chaotic antagonisms of today.” His painting ‘Rock’ was illustrated in the magazine. Emily Genauer included Gross in “The Critic’s Pick” in the *Telegram*’s “This Week in Art.” John D. Morse in *Magazine of Art* included him in his list of the “Top Ten Critics’ Selections” that included the distinguished company of Henry Moore, Jacob Lawrence, and Robert Motherwell and left out other now well known Ab Ex painters. Morse also selected one of his paintings for the prestigious Armory Show. .

*Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell praised Gross’ ‘Victory 1945’, which was purchased by the Whitney Museum and widely reproduced. ‘Victory Song’ (fig) was purchased by the brilliant and controversial Julius Lempert, the first, perhaps, of some 20 paintings acquired by his foundation that hung in his private Lempert Institute of



Endaural Surgery, near Lenox Hill Hospital. When the “Dr.” Lempert, who had no formal training as a surgeon, and in fact, never served a residency, finally won international fame and honorary MD degrees for some of his inventions and innovations in aural surgery, Sidney Gross painted his portrait on the occasion of his Award of Merit from the Otological Society.

His “Industrial Variations #1” went on exhibit at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Institute from October 13 - December 11 as part of *Painting in the United States*. It was later sold by the Rehn Gallery.

## **1946 - New Themes - Styles**

Moving past the war as a theme, his ‘Forms at Dusk’ was singled out from a One Man Show in 1946 at Contemporary Arts. Devree wrote, Sidney Gross “puts forth new claims to consideration as an artist with something to say and with steadily increasing facility in saying it. He is not too pigeonholed as a practitioner of expressionist, surrealist or a practitioner of abstraction, nor yet as a romantic realist, although there is a blend of all of those in his recent canvases. ”Of The ‘El to Erewhon,’ he said Gross “has something of the mordent quality that [author Samuel] Butler would have acclaimed.” An element of Luddite distrust of machines is present in many of his early works. Devree lauded ‘Technological Landscape’ and ‘Manhattan Landscape.’ They were “satirical impressions of a cock-eyed world.” He described ‘Interior’ as “tender and nostalgic.”

The range of Gross in that exhibit was revealed in the review’s next observation, “‘The Dance,’ a smaller picture combines color with calligraphic statements and is strident, bizarre and strident.” ‘Skating Rink’ and “Train Wreck’ from the same exhibit found homes. DeVree went on to say, “Gross make use of color with instinctive, but incidentally decorative effect. If you study many of his works in his varied styles, one thing is clear, he likes big strong upthrusting design.” Clearly, while most of his early work showed the influence of the concurrent trends in the art world, all of it revealed his distinctive signature vision.

In its May issue, *Magazine of Art* devoted a full page to the exhibit, illustrating ‘Rooftops’ and ‘Victory’ and John Morse wrote:

What first took my eye at last year’s exhibition was the paint itself. It didn’t look as it had come out of a tube. It had subtlety and a richness of texture that suggested 16th century Venice instead of 20th century America. And color ... approached El Greco. Later I learned that similarity was no accident ... What is also clear is that Sidney Gross at 25 knows pretty well what he wants to say and has found the right way of saying it. ... To have achieved even the beginning of such a union of form and content so easily and so early holds definite promise for the future.

The *Tribune*’s critic Emily Genauer headlined her story “Gross is Arresting,” also citing ‘El to Erewhon.’ He received excellent press in publications as far away as

Chicago and Toledo, Ohio.

Gross' most laudatory early review was probably the three-page color spread in *Pic Magazine* which was headlined: "A Guy, a Brush, and a Future / Sidney Gross, 25 Year-Old Veteran, Hailed by US Art Critics as a Painter of Assurance," exclamation points unnecessary. Gross was "a recently discovered diamond," a seer who "before the war ... painted what the ravages of war could do to humanity. He foretold the possibility of an atomic force in an early triptych." This assessment combined with Gross's musings about the nature of a reality in which everything solid consisted of empty space in which atoms were made up unimaginatively smaller particles, suggests he kept up with science news. Four of his works were reproduced for his readers.

*Art Digest*, however, gave a mixed review of the show, but noted that his paintings now sold from \$100-400 (a little short of \$5000 in 2013). Frequency of mention is a good measure of fame, the next month the same magazine quoted the young artist who said of his 'Rooftops,' which was to receive much press over the years, "I tried to detach the idea from reality, physically as well as aesthetically. It is from this period, that we date his meticulous muted semi-abstracts of construction. It became a world unto itself resting in infinite space." The same sentence appears in one of the artist's small sketchbooks. Most important, Critic Ralph Pearson agreed that he succeeded.

## **Exhibition at the Whitney**

The 1946 Whitney Exhibition included works by Gross that leaned "decidedly more towards the left," according to the NY Times. Their permanent collection now boasted two Gross paintings: *Victory* (1945) and *Oasis* (1956). He exhibited along with artists with substantial or soon to be substantial reputations like Mark Rothko (1908-1970), whom he may well have known through their Provincetown connection. Rothko won the enviable commission for the *Four Seasons* and returned the money and refused to hang his masterpieces in 1959 when Gross was at the height of his career. Both he and Rothko battled depression and both ended their own lives prematurely.

If Rothko's career and success can be described as a roller coaster, it's hard not to describe Gross' career as a skyrocket, that ended in eventual obscurity. Reviews of the '40s and '50s listed him with Morris Graves, Gwathney, Gropper, Evergood, Hirsch and Philip Gustin, Pollack and others as artists commenting on the depression, the war years and the post war years, and even the not yet known as the cold war.

His exhibitions were hugely successful. The New York dealer Gertrude Stein said years later, "You know most of his shows sold out." Gross sold five paintings from this period to Hollywood screenwriter and eventually Emmy award winning TV director/producer Al Schwartz (1910-88). The most striking '*Coney Island Phantasy*' (Fig 16 - probably painted in 1945) contrasts a very snake-like roller coaster and happy crowds on the board walk with the war-torn bunkers of Europe, across a turbulent sea. The

others, in the same vein include 'The Release,' and 'The Rock.' At least two, 'The Spectre' (an early amorphous and 'Hudson River Dock' are probably from the late 1940s or early 1950s. His painting 'Of Boats and Men' was included in the Whitney 1948 annual exhibition of American Art. Other notable AbEx painters in that exhibit include Hans Hoffman, Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning. Many other notable artists were not included. In 1947 reviewing Jon Corbino's solo at Kleeman Galleries, Critic Carlyle Burroughs who had "an uneasy reaction" to modernism "applauded artists like Adolph Gottlieb and a bit less enthusiastically Sidney Gross who had been Corbino's student."

Gross soon moved beyond a decidedly grim vision of man's place in the universe. Also, perhaps as a measure of his success, sometime before 1948, he rented studio space at 126 E 24th St. across the street from City University's School of Business (now Baruch College - CUNY). One of his aunts visited the studio and selected 'Highway #2' for their new apartment. He charged them half price (\$250), suggesting that in today's dollars it would have been priced around \$4500. The story passed down by the family was that they were miffed both at the price and because they thought it was to have been a gift.

That year, he earned two notable *Times* critiques. Critic (and managing editor of *Arts News*) Aline Louchheim (Saarinen) spoke of the "promising Sidney Gross ... discovering a new, romantic beauty in the city." She contrasted him and a few others with the "hundreds" who sought to indict the ugliness of the city ... who deliberately propagandized the squalor of the city and the humdrum effects of its life." Critic Howard DeVree cited his work in an article entitled "Courbet the Vital."

His 1949 show of Semi-Abstract Fantasies earned reviews from both *Art News* and *Art Digest*. Both illustrated his painting 'Square Circle.' 'The Boat' was illustrated in the book *Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture*, published by the University of Illinois. *The New Yorker* magazine reviewed his "City Side Streets and Docks."

## **1950 - 'Near-Abstract'**

The artist's 1950 Rehn exhibit focused on New York City, in part the result of a Tiffany Scholarship. Stuart Preston wrote, "In his new near-abstract work at the Rehn galleries, Sidney Gross comes close to creating prefabricated paints. Precisely defined, perfectly abstract pieces of bright, mottled color fit together, like parts in a jig-saw puzzle, into designs that represent with conviction landscape and still life. The resulting patterns are vigorous, flat and unemotional. Their abundance of straight and right angles at the joinings of color sections gives them a rigidity that is not displeasing." *Art Digest* featured an illustration of one several of his paintings entitled 'On the River.' A cartoon for part of "Working" dates from before 1952.

In 1951, his painting 'Altar' was included in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *American Painting Today*, an important cataloged exhibit. His career future seemed

assured. This is an interesting inclusion because the omission of many of today's big names in Ab Ex were the subject of many letters objecting to the omission of much of the work of Abstract Expressionists.

To this point in his career, Gross painted a wide range of subjects and in several styles. The common denominator was his subtle and complex use of layered paint. His subjects included portraits of individuals and Jazz musicians, mural plans usually incorporating a montage of images, bold calligraphic designs, delicate mosaic-like semi-abstractions of urban scenes, darker visions of Man in a mechanistic landscape, and his first true abstractions, later to be labeled Amorphism.

His painting entitled 'The Boat' was included in the 2nd annual *Exhibition of American Painting #45* in the Metropolitan Museum of Arts' catalog. In the accompanying biographical note, his dual scholarships and his inclusion in three museum permanent collections was noted. 'Attendant' was illustrated in *Art News* in its January 1948 edition.

'Cityscape' in the collection of the Jewish Museum is dated 1949 and helps date other paintings in that style which included 'Train Wreck' and the undated examples (Fig ). Gross was clearly working on several styles in the first years after the war. What is remarkable is that all of them, short-lived though they might have been, were critically acclaimed and artistically powerful.

His bold ink sketches of construction and the waterfront from a portfolio preserved by his third wife likely date from this year.

### **1951 - "Luminous, mottled color"**

In 1951, Gross added "semiabstract scenes in luminous areas of mottled color" to his annual solo exhibition at the Rehn Gallery. A *NY Times* reviewer wrote, "Gross takes urban drab industrial scenes, street corners, buildings and mechanical paraphernalia and instead of literally reporting them, he uses them as points of departure for his pieces of embroidery in paint, made up of glowing colors that coat his willful shapes," (Figs) although he added that "Gross has a curious fuzzy technique." The same year his work appeared in the annual invitational exhibit at the Carnegie Institute where his work was cited as "especially well represented." His work was included in the first Hallmark Greeting Card Company contest. Although they did not give his work an award, critic Aline Louchheim argued it deserved one in her review of the exhibition.

He was also awarded a Tiffany Fellowship by a jury of his peers: Leon Kroll, Robert Brackman, Martin Lewis, Adolph Weinman, Gleb Derujinsk, Charles W. Locke, and Lynd Ward. From notes in his hand, it appears the grant led to his exhibit in 1951, 'On the River' as well as many sketches included here (fig).

### **1951-2 - 'Urban Abstractions'**

In 1951, through the Hassam Fund, the American Academy of the Arts & Letters added one of Gross' urban abstractions to its permanent collection, the first of two such purchases. His work continued to appear in invitational exhibitions in a number of venues, including the National Academy of Design. His 1952 painting 'Reflections' is in the permanent collection of the Butler Institute. The artist described his technique as "a complex structure of transparent glazes" over a "white lead ground."

His 1951 show at Rehn, "On the River", was illustrated and drew applause from fellow artist-critic Belle Krasne. Most of the paintings were 30" x 40", though a few were smaller. He had been doing sketches in preparation for this exhibit, which show his strong and sure hand. They were semi-abstract with titles like Industrial Variation #3, 'Skyscraper,' 'Excavation,' 'Side Street,' 'Yellow Ladder,' 'Harbor', and three works all titled 'On the River.' Included was a striking painting of the iconographic Chrysler building to this day remains in the family. He also included one 'Flower Motif.'

This show produced memorable colorful abstractions of tugboats (Fig 32-34), docks and workers. A group of his sketches (Fig 23) for these paintings are finished works of art on their own. The forms of his dramatic, almost calligraphic, abstract compositions from this period underlie his paintings.

A group of calligraphic sketches are dated 1952 (shown on the endpapers). The Butler Museum's collection of over 200 similar sketches and wood and linoleum block prints probably date from the same period, as do a group of small, un-stretched oils.

### **1953 - Corcoran exhibit**

His work, even as it metamorphosed into new approaches, continued to rate plaudits from the *NY Times*. Of his 1953 exhibit, Preston said, "All is calm, all is dusky in Sidney Gross' discreet, mysterious and beautifully painted abstracts ... as little susceptible of exact interpretations as cloud forms or the face of the moon ... the pictures are gratifying to the eye ... a slowly moving kaleidoscope of autumnal moods." The "In Brief" comment described them as "of unusual refinement." His luminous colors, labeled by other critics as "emotional", "feverish", "banked like fires" are always described as tempered, "subject to the discipline of design."

Art Dealer Frank Rehn, whose gallery, founded in 1858, was best known for promoting artists like Edward Hopper (1882-1977), Charles Burchfield (1893-1967) and Reginald Marsh (1898-1954), had early taken the young artist under his wing. Miss Taylor wrote in a undated note, probably from the late 1940s, that "Mr. Rehn told me what faith he had in Sidney's work and that whether it sold or not he would keep right on exhibiting it. I don't suppose that elderly man is at the gallery now, but his kind should live forever." Rehn provided Gross with a regular venue for solo shows even as the artist moved into abstract expressionism. Rehn suffered a stroke in 1953 and died three years later. John Clancy, the gallery director, who over time changed the focus to works

on paper and multiples, continued to promote Sidney Gross, until his death and in two retrospectives. Eventually, the gallery would close in the 1970s. Undoubtedly, the change in focus and stewardship contributed to the artist's long term recognition, however, valuable it was to his financial success during his lifetime.

The editors of *Contemporary American Painting & Sculpture* (1953) listed Gross, noting that his work "was already in the permanent collections of the Whitney, ... Princeton University and the University of Georgia." The same year the Corcoran accepted 'Moves in Blue' for its invitational exhibition.

### **'Uneasy Reaction to our Age'**

Gross' style continued to metamorphose. His contribution to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art exhibit in 1954 was "an arresting semiabstract reaction to our uneasy age and its problems," according to Devree. The artist's statement in the Rehn catalog read: "New levels of suggestions here come as a result of the closer connection between science and metaphysics. A vast, mysterious, ordered universe opens before us ... I've tried to synthesize cerebral and emotional elements constant."

The same year, the Whitney Museum purchased his painting 'Woven Orbit,' and he won the Hassam, Speicher, Betts and Symons Purchase Award from the American Academy of Arts & Letters for a still life. Carlyle Burrows in the Tribune noted "his uneasy reaction to our age" in his pieces in the Audobon Artists Exhibit.

Outlining the crowded 1956 season, the *NY Times* reporter included Sidney Gross among seven "Well Known Americans and Cezanne." His work was included in the American Federation of Arts "Trends in American Painting 1954-1956," along with 60 other artists from Josef Albers and Milton Avery to Jean Xceron (1890-1967 Ab Ex painter). Most of the to-be-big names in Ab Ex paintings, Pollock, Kline, DeKooning from the New York School were included.

### **Murals - Montages - Abraham to Palestine**

Stylistically connected to his work of late 1940s or early 1950s are Sidney Gross' large montages featuring basketball, workers, movie cameras, nudes, animals and the F-86, produced from the late 1940s to 1956. If they date from then, they are truly innovative in their inclusion of contemporary imagery in an area already explored by several mural artists. It is possible, however, that they were done later in response to the rise of the Pop Artists. Interestingly, the basketball players appear to be in the uniform of NYU. Coincidentally, in 1936, the captain of the NYU team was named Sidney Gross, and during the 1930s and again in the 1950s, the team had enormous national success. Their home court was a short walk from Gross' Chelsea studio.

Also, Gross' undated papers reference several mural proposals and these large canvasses may be the product of his effort to earn public commissions.

His large painting of the Golum and distraught priests probably depicts the destruction visited on Jewish culture by the Nazis. While the larger body of his work draws little on his Jewish heritage, an undated draft of a "Description & Continuity of a Proposed Mural" reveals his narrative imagination and hints at his scholarship. The proposed site is unknown, but the proposal is clearly site specific and large in scale. There's no record of his receiving the commission. He proposed "a heroic theme – a personal evaluation of Jewish History from Abraham to Palestine condensed to fit the allotted space."

Following are excerpts from a handwritten draft of that proposal from papers donated to the Smithsonian by Elaine Gross. It very much recalls the language of James Newell proposal for as well as the artistic composition of his WPA mural at Evander Childs High School. In his proposal, Gross writes:

The mural begins with Abraham rising out of the emptiness of idol worship, idols based on the Syrian male Sphinx, Egyptian goddess Sekhmut and the Hittite god Teshub. We move into Egypt with Rameses II, the Pharaoh of the Exodus. The Moses section with the tablets of law, move[s] directly into Solomon, the era of Israel's greatest power.

The most desperate hour I've combined with the actual fall of the temple, the equally crushing blows dealt it by its external enemies and its own corrupt kings and aristocracy. The synagogue symbol is from a 14th century Spanish Hebrew manuscript. Grand Inquisitor Thomas de Torquenada burned over 2000 heretics and imprisoned and ruined 100,000 others, most of them marranos, the group moving toward the burning. The symbol of the Ghetto follows, barred and bolted by heavy chains. The Cabala section depicts a condensation of symbols: Amulets against the Evil Eye, 17th century paper amulet, the ten Divine Attributes (Spheres), a signature of Solomon Maleho with pennant of Messianic redemption and a sequence of cryptic word symbols. The French Revolution extoll[ed] reason above dogma, the rights of man, freedom of conscience. That liberated the Jew from their Ghetto prison.

The second side begins with an intimation of the Great Synagogues which began to flourish everywhere. At the height of Jewish Intellectual accomplishment, the two great figures of our time, Einstein & Freud. The rest we know too well. At this apex of Civilization, the Nazi horror arrives. I have used a symbol of the furnaces again the benediction symbol and now the prelude to Palestine, the shekel of liberation Theodor Herzl. The soldiers are a symbol of the Haganah along with the Hasidic recruits, a defense army.

We now move to the tillers of the soil, the development of a farming community. In both sides of the industrial section, I have placed symbolic 'immigrants'. In front of the ever growing development, I have placed Weizman and Ben Gurion.

The Talmud says about the Torah – 'It is not the Torah of the Priests, not the Torah of the Levites, nor the Torah of the Israelites, but the Torah of Man. Its gates are open to receive the righteous nation which keeps the truth and those who are good and upright in their hearts.'

## New York School

Gross was not a member of the somewhat amorphous “New York School” of artists, poets, playwrights, dancers and musicians, as much as his work fits into their time and vision. He did not exhibit in any of the New York Annuals (1951-57), first on 9th street and later at the uptown Stable Gallery which provided a venue for Abstract Expressionist artists, when “there were few galleries that were willing to accept the work of artists who were unknown to the established critics.” (Marika Herskovic, *Abstract Expressionists - Artists Choice by Artists*). 265 different painters and sculptors exhibited in the eight Annuals. In addition, some who did not exhibit are also often listed as part of the school, but not Gross.

There are likely several possible reasons that Sidney Gross name is not associated with the group. Success may have been the most important, ironic because in the decades that followed, most of the artists in the New York School (or their estates) saw prices for their work climb dramatically. At the time, Gross had a regular venue for solo shows at the Rehn Gallery and the Contemporary Art Gallery. And although by 1952, his output included calligraphic action paintings, what the critics were to label amorphics, and bolder abstract expressionist canvases, he was enjoying continued success with his semi-abstract work, as in his kaleidoscopic construction paintings, his River series, not to mention his portraiture. While an innovative artist in his own right, he was a generation removed from many of the artists who had explored Abstract Expressionism. Finally, his personality may have had something to do with it. The New York School was born of a mix of interdisciplinary artists who supported each other’s work and socialized together, and Gross clearly chose to keep a distance from the social cultural circle he called “the art scene,” though in his lectures, he discussed and vehemently defended their work.

There were other connections that tied many of the New York School together. Many studied and taught at Pratt or at Brooklyn, or with Hans Hoffman or other shared mentors. Many found their way out to the East End of Long Island, and while only a few were connected with Provincetown where Gross occasionally summered. Finally, by the time the reputations and prices of Ab Ex artists rose after the craze for Pop Art, Sidney Gross had died without heirs to promote his work.

Of the approximately 100 painters and sculptors whose work appears in *New York School Abstract Expressionists* only one, Michael Goldberg (1924-2007) who began studying at age 14 at the Art Students League was there when Gross was there (1938-40). None of the New York School taught there when Gross was either a student or a teacher. One member of the school, Manoucher Yektai (1922-), studied at the Art Students League after the war and recalled Sidney Gross and his work which he outspokenly admired. Gross corresponded with the Ukrainian-American artist Maurice



Sievan (1898-1981) who had studied at ASL earlier and exhibited in the Tirca Karlis Gallery in Provincetown where Gross had showed in 1960 and 1962. His Provincetown connections may have included many of the artists who worked and exhibited there.

An informal comparison of his work with the New York School artists is interesting. His small bold black calligraphic paintings certainly evoke Frans Kline's (1903-1962) larger scale work of the same and an earlier period. Kline, as Robert Motherwell (1915-91) made this their signature styles, whereas Gross moved on. Interestingly, the artist's works from 1959-62 closest in feel to Sidney's of 1957-60 are those of his only fellow League student, Michael Goldberg.

No one in the period seems to have offered the equivalent the soft "dusky" style of his Amorphics, and while his abstract expressionist work of the mid 1950s is kin to what many artists were painting at the same time, by 1960 his strong up-thrusting forms against flatter and flatter color fields seem distinctively his own, although Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974) had explored action painting in or adjacent to a relatively monochromatic fields early in the 1950s.

## **Other Echoes**

Looking back, his complicated montages with clearly identifiable imagery, seem ahead of their time as well. Their imagery and hints in his notes seem to date them to the 1950s, but if they were done in response to the growing Pop Art movement at the end of the decade, they are still earlier than the Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) montages of fighter jets and pop culture they bring to mind. They, of course, lack the commercial finished look that Warhol brought to the glorification of the ordinary. Gross' kaleidoscopic paintings like 'Ice Skating', 'Boom' and other paintings of construction hark back to earlier traditions, recalling the rich texturing of Gustav Klimt (1862-1918).

## **1958 Amalgamation of Styles**

His style had matured showing "a marked advance," an amalgamation of two distinct trends in contemporary art, the juxtaposition of energetic abstract expressionist designs set against geometric fields of color. Dore Ashton of the *NY Times* wrote, "They are large controlled abstractions in which dense gray-black and earthen tones provide the matrix for burning red, black, blue." *Arts Magazine* featured his 'Vertex.' Later critics would label this innovation as his most significant contribution. In March of 1958, his work was featured at the Zabriskie Gallery, which concentrated on AbEx paintings.

That year, he participated in the Annual Exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors. He also won the Grand Prize at Art/USA and \$500 for his painting "Promontory," rating illustrations in several publications including a mention in *Time Magazine*. Only seven paintings were honored out of over 1500 shown and many

more submitted. His solo exhibit at Rehn Gallery that year included a number of paintings lent by private and museum collections. He began to teach classes at the Art Students League.

## **'Explodes like Stormy Waves'**

1959 brought a rash of solid reviews including ones from the *NY Times*, the *Tribune*, *The Arts*, *Arts Magazine*, and *Art News*. The *NY Times*: "Massed, broken color rolls, crashes and explodes like stormy waves against the rocks. Visually these complexly handled ideas make an impressive appearance." A critic in another paper wrote, "His paints have a structural pulse whose regularity attests to an unchanged development." *Arts Magazine* illustrated his 'Prometheus Bound.'

His painting 'Platform 180' was included in an exhibit at the Hotebe School in Lakeville, CT, along with the works of Burchfield, Corbin, Hopper, Marsh, Henry Varnum Poor, and others, all represented by Rehn Gallery. At that point, Sidney appears to have been the only Abstract Expressionist artist in a gallery which made famous a stable of artists known for social realism, industrial art, and visionary art. His work was again included in the Corcoran Biennial.

Gross' work clearly parallels the work of the second generation of Ab Ex painters. Lance Espland, in the *New Republic* (8/11/11) says of Gross' slightly later contemporary Joan Mitchell (1925-92), "The New York School artists — breaking rules, breaking ground, and breaking ties with Europe — opened Mitchell's eyes and gave her the language, the confidence, and the freedom to develop her voice; but it was the Europeans who taught her just how rich and poetic painting could be." These words could be said of Sidney Gross as well. Artists in the New York School drew on surrealist traditions, a sensibility that permeated Gross' work in the 1940s.

## **1960s - Maturity**

Of his 1960 painting in the Butler Art Institute (Fig 45 available as a print from the museum), given to the museum years later by the Art Students League, curator Carl David wrote:

Combining abstract elements with his unique spatial perspective, the artist allowed his forms to float against a solid background, while presenting to the viewer a central formal element of harmoniously placed color, simultaneously separated from and integrated into it.

Composition #10 is an extraordinary embodiment of this technique ... The vertical drip marks provide the illusion of upward movement, cross-cut by a small but emphatic window of blue sky with a wisp of white cloud, which contrasts to the lush greens of the central form. This is supported by the intrusion of black diagonals, which form yet another composition within the subject.

He had achieved both financial and critical success, and he had yet to turn 40. His

work was in a number of museums, he was on juries for submissions to various exhibits as a “well known artist” including the New Haven Arts Festival, as noted in the *Bridgeport Post*. Gross’ paintings from this year marked a change in his style and dramatically divergent reactions. The *NY Times* critic complained that his new work was “bereft of any poetic or natural suggestions,” while the critic in *Arts Magazine* said, “The size and Baroque sweep of them make standing near them as physically exciting and unnerving as a carnival ride.” The 1960 abstract (Fig 46) illustrates the change that was to lead quickly to works juxtaposing dynamic action painting with large fields of color.

Although not many records of this period survive, his prices reflected his success, ranging from \$2000 to \$5000 (up to \$40,000 in 2011 dollars) for his larger canvasses. Since he was also a teacher at Art Students League, it is worth noting that in 1960 a New York City teacher with a masters degree earned \$2640 a year, about what Sidney got for one painting.

There was a marked decline of interest in Ab Ex work concurrent with the rise in popularity of Pop and Minimalism that began in the late 1950s. The last New York Annual was 1957. Many of today’s biggest names were affected. His contemporary Joan Mitchell (1925-92), moved permanently to France in 1959 and “lived in relative isolation,” according to Charlotte Rubinstein, *American Women Artists. Engram*

Gross could not have been immune, and a decline in sales may have triggered his acceptance of a full time teaching position at Art Students League in 1961 (where he had taught workshops in the summer for several years including 1959). Then in 1963 accepted a offer at the University of Maryland, along with summer programs at the League and at Columbia University. All at the same time ... a busy schedule.

## **New Studio & Honors**

Early in 1961, The American Federation of Arts invited him to submit a painting to a traveling exhibit, ‘Young Painter - U.S.A.’ The year-long exhibit began in November 1961, its itinerary took the paintings to the College of Wooster (OH), Art Alliance of Altoona (PA), University of Mississippi, Jacksonville Arts Club (FL), Tulane University (LA), Bates College (ME), Carleton College (MN), and ended at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Around the same time, Gross applied for a lease on a larger loft to work in, an indication of his growing success. He was also in correspondence with his early patron Al Schwartz who invited him to Hollywood to see “how your paintings look on our walls.” That surviving letter suggests a long-term relationship between the two couples.

One of his paintings was included in and illustrated in the catalog for the *27th Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting* at the Corcoran.

The caption to his 1962 painting on permanent display at the Art Students League reads “In the 1940s, Gross used jewel tones and stylized forms to portray the docks and

industrial scenes of New York City. By the early 1960s, he had forged a unique visual language that combined hard-edge and gestural abstraction, still in bold colors.” A photograph of his ‘Archimage on Purple” (1962) appeared in the *Baltimore Sun* along with the news that it had been given to The Baltimore Museum of Art by Ruth Bernstein.

The catalog entry on his Achimage on Yellow #2 in the College of William & Mary describes this stage of his work:

An archimage is a head magician or wizard. This is a study in color and texture ... His colors are striking, and their compositions forceful. Combining abstract elements with his unique spatial perspective, the artist allowed his forms to float against a solid background while presenting to the viewer a central formal element of harmoniously placed color, simultaneously separated from and integrated into it. He used the intrusion of black.

Gross was quite expert in his design, formatting his composition so that it would flow without dissonance. Every element appears inherently intertwined with another.

His 1963 one-man exhibit in Provincetown rated significant publicity. Two of his 1959 paintings are included in the permanent collection of the Provincetown Art Museum, an untitled abstract and ‘Engram #4’. Science Fiction and Dianetics founder author Ron Hubbard defines the term: “Engram - a definite and permanent trace left by a stimulus on the protoplasm of a tissue,” basically a physical change in the brain as a result of a powerful memory-inducing event.

His annual exhibit at Rehn Gallery was of “paintings that had gone into public collections before being exhibited in New York” including, the Corcoran, Baltimore Museum of Art, Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Columbia, University of Illinois, and Morgan State College.

Marital infidelity may have become an issue around this time. It is also possible that his wife was ailing. In any case, his production of new work seems diminished. A number of paintings are dated 1960 and 1961, but none of the paintings we have seen are dated 1962 or 1963, but, then again, most of his paintings are not dated or and many are not signed.

“A foundation and a well known collector” invited the Metropolitan Museum of Art to select a painting from his 1962 exhibition for their permanent collection. It was a good year in museum recognition. Gross shipped paintings to Morgan State College, the Baltimore Museum, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the Washington Gallery of Modern Art. The shipping bill was \$105.75.

He enjoyed solid press in the *Baltimore Sun*, probably as a result of a gift of his painting to the Baltimore Museum and the fact he had begun teaching at the University of Maryland.

## **Kay Gross Dies**

His relative drought continued. His wife Kay died in 1964. According to a friend of the family, she may have committed suicide. The recent widower may have been already involved with the socially prominent, German-born, Juliana (Julie) Penn, whom he married shortly after Kay's death, a marriage that apparently didn't last long because she left because of his drinking.

Whatever the case, 1964 was one of the few years he did not have a solo exhibit at Rehn Gallery. His work, however, was included in *American Art Today, World's Fair - 1964*. It must have been a difficult year for him. Peter Manso relates in *P-Town, Art, Sex, and Money on the Outer Cape* an incident from a Norman Mailer party at his home "Alcohol didn't entirely blur the focus on art. At another gathering, the painter Sidney Gross began throwing furniture around because of an unresolved argument over Soutine." Although this brief reference to his behavior at a party hints at some relationships with fellow artists, Gross apparently never affiliated with schools or groups of artists with similar aims, as did many fellow artists of the period. Again, as noted earlier, he apparently deliberately steered clear of the "art scene."

As to his drinking, according to one of his students at the time, "His lessons were affected by the tragedies in his personal life, the drinking & smoking - also in class simultaneously - made it hard at the end for both, him & students. He suffered on various fronts, today it would probably called bi-polar depression."

Around this time, however, he refined his most distinctive contribution to the second generation of Abstract Expressionism, the dramatic juxtaposition of knots of energetic, kinetic color and blacks against strong geometric areas of complimentary color, stated goals in his lecture notes for his classes at the Art Student's League.

## **1965-66 - Chaos & Order**

His 1965 show was "in memory of my beloved wife Kay. Whatever these, or the paintings I've made for twenty years, are ultimately worth, their creation was always so intimately connected with her, that I have to regard them as ours."

Commenting on Gross' 1966 painting 'Solar Rendezvous' now in the Witchita Museum in 1988, Howard E. Wooden wrote:

Gross added a new dimension by introducing a hard edged quality to splintery and irregular multicolored forms ... a chaotically-organized cluster of small, brightly-colored interlocking shapes ... In sharp contrast is the more orderly arrangement of the structure at the right that appears to be energetically charged and, like a rocket, soars upwards linking the massive black area in the lower register of the canvas with the pure white space above, unbroken but for the delicate orange and blue diagonal bars ...

One of the most significant stylistic achievements of Sidney Gross ... was his extremely sensitive ability to harmonize the opposing romantic and classical poles of expression that for many centuries have

dominated Western thought and the character of Western art.

Wooden called Gross “one of the most accomplished exponents” of Abstract Expressionism. Artist Helen Thomas wrote: “while studying under Sidney Gross that I changed from representational painting to the style of Abstract Expressionism.” She his lessons in the “use of a quick drying mixture of a medium of oil paint that enabled [the artist] to work swiftly ... in Gross’s class I did come to realize that the color of a layer of paint can be different in different surroundings.”

His 71”x 66” UFO #16 was purchased by one of his patrons for the Philbrook Art Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma and part of a major exhibition from three collections the same year at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum.

On the personal side, the recent widower married 40 year old German-born Julianna (Julie) Culmsee Penn (1928-80) who was to move with him to Baltimore. Like his first wife, Julia was also an amateur artist. Their marriage did not last long, according to her family, as she complained he was a heavy drinker and often abusive to her, and she left him shortly after the marriage. They may have been divorced, because in her instructions to the executor of her estate, Julianna indicated that her personal papers including her marriage and divorce papers were to be destroyed. The executor was her close friend Pearl Applebaum whom she had met working at Reply-O-Letter, an advertising firm whose headquarters were in midtown Manhattan. To the president of Reply-O-Letter, Joe Bucheheit and to another co-worker there, Tina Gotta, she left her own paintings which apparently hung in the company offices and art supplies.

When Julie died in 1989, she still had a number of Sidney’s works as her notes on their distribution in 1977 and 1978 indicated. Julie made a number of general bequests of her own artwork to friends and neighbors, and although she “was not close” with her brother Bruno Culmsee, she also wanted him to have “some of my artwork.” The large painting by Sidney (fig#) and smaller one was “on loan” to Pearl, and Julie indicated they were theirs to will or to keep, or, she suggested, they could be given to the Jewish Museum in New York or Israel. “His work I am sure will not be difficult to give to anyone.” A self portrait of Sidney and one of his gouaches were shipped to her sister Charlotte Schwaeppe in Germany along with “a few of my artworks.”

### **‘Intellect Tempered by Emotion’**

Noted critic John Canady reviewed Gross’ winter 1967 solo exhibit of innovative combinations of “sections of abstract-expressionist paintings within or against hard-edged geometrical schemes” a somewhat mixed review. “His results vary from effective synthesis to unsatisfying compromises.” A student, now an accomplished artist, Sigrun Mueller, said of his work, “I adored his work before he started the hard-edge form inclusion in his gorgeous abstract work and learned much from him.” Although this

continued to be an emotionally difficult period for him, it began well with the January purchase by the Alpern Foundation of 'Engram #1' which they presented to the University of Maryland. He apparently sold five of his canvasses in his 1967 solo exhibit at Rehn. Given his prices, he certainly wasn't suffering financially.

Jeanne Parks in *Arts Magazine* headlined her preview: "Expressionist UFOs in Gross, Exhibit Tomorrow" and added, "Intellect tempered by emotion and extended by cosmic realization infuse ... Sidney Gross' recent paintings." Some writers speculated that Gross sought an artistic expression to parallel the space age, but it is most likely that the artist took inspiration from Carl Jung's book *Civilization in Transition*. Gross quotes Jung in the catalog for his exhibit:

UFO is a symbol consisting not only of archetypal forms of thought but of instinctual elements as well ... It does not appeal only to man's conscious technological fantasies, or to his philosophical speculations, but strikes deep down into his 'animal nature.' This is what we expect a genuine symbol to do; it must affect and express the whole of man.

From his copious notes on ancient and contemporary myths which survive, Sidney Gross consciously strove to find and incorporate 'genuine' symbols for his entire career.

At this time, Gross left his teaching position at The Art Students League, though not his ties, to accept a tenured position as Associate Professor of Art in the graduate program at the University of Maryland at College Park, Baltimore. He also delivered a major paper "The Symbology of Color." He rented an apartment there that had enough space to paint, though, of course, he had studio space at the University.

Gross, who left little indication he had been involved in anything political, became embroiled, almost immediately, in an impassioned defense of Morton Grossman, the accomplished watercolor and painting teacher who was dismissed for political reasons. Gross' papers in the National Archives contain several, heavily emended drafts of his statement before the faculty committee. Despite, or perhaps because of that, just before he died, the student body chose him as their favorite professor.

### **Marriage Number 3**

A high school friend and distant cousin, Lynn Landman, claimed to have introduced Sidney to her "best friend," Elaine August, a semi-professional singer working with Lynn at the Jewish philanthropy Federation. Lynn Landman (1921-2012) went on to become a noted journalist and editor. She also knew a number of artists in addition to Sidney, notably "Ad Reinhardt [who] had a huge crush on her and drew her off-color, self-mocking love cartoons." As a child, Lynn's son, Jonathon Landman recalls meeting Sidney in the company of Elaine several times after they were married. After his death, Elaine gave the Landmans one of Sidney's Bardo series.

It seems possible that she knew Sidney already. She had been a "patron of the Art

Students League” where Sidney had long taught, and according to her own written “biography” for her 75th birthday, she “met Sidney in 1940” and got married the same year, and that he died a year later. At the time she was in early stages of dementia when she wrote this in the 1990s, but it was accurate in that he died less than a year after their marriage.

Elaine was an advocate of social issues and the publicity director of the Women’s Division of the State of Israel Bonds, Maryland. As a member of the New York Collegiate Chorale, she had met Marian Anderson, who was also photographed with Sidney.

Elaine became Sidney’s wife on March 12, 1969. According to his marriage announcement in the *Bridgeport Post*, they were to live in College Park, MD, but clearly they divided their time between there and his apartment in New York City. His initial happiness may be inferred from the two paintings he gave her as a wedding gift, both uncharacteristically, light-filled, joyful, almost playful abstractions. She kept them through her long life (fig#s).

## **1969 - ‘The Bardo Triptyches’**

His lecture notes and comments by his students indicate he was working on a book on Color and Aesthetic Concepts built off Wilhelm Ostwald’s Color system and work on color theory by his fellow artist Josef Albers. In 1987, he gave a public lecture at the University of Maryland, College Park entitled “Symbology of Color.” His extensive writing, mostly in longhand, on the relationship of physical science and psychology and art suggest that a book on that relationship, too, was in his future.

In 1968, one of his most consistent supporters, Dr. Julius Lempert, died. Gross continued painting, teaching and writing, splitting his time between Baltimore and New York. Several of his UFO paintings are dated this year.

An extensive review in *Art News* 1969 show, “The Bardo Triptychs,” notes that “‘Bardo’ comes from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead [Bardo Thodol]* and is used by the artist to convey the ‘state of highest awareness’ hopefully experienced by the viewer as he gazes at the afterimage of the hard-edge shapes projected on the white band.” Another *Art News* reviewer reflected that “calligraphy, geometry and the void were ... held together by suave, hot color schemes.” Ironically, Bardo is the Lamaist word for the time between death and rebirth.

The tumult in his family life continued. According to one family member, Sidney’s father, Morris was very ill in the summer of 1969.

In the end, as always, he had not restricted himself to his developing style as can be seen in his “Summer 1969” painting in the Guus Maris Gallery in the Netherlands.

## **Untimely Death**

If Sidney Gross was moving to a newer synthesis of the several movements in



modern art that resonated in his work, it was not to be. He died suddenly November 17, 1969.

Elaine maintained, according to her stepdaughter, that Sidney had committed suicide, though his official death certificate indicates heart attack. His history of bouts with serious depression, hints of manic periods, the recent upheavals in his life (death and divorce), the problem of dividing his time between New York and Baltimore, and the cool reception to his Bardo series, certainly sets the stage for severe depression. He had put on weight, smoked heavily all his life, and had apparently begun drinking heavily after his first wife's death. The 1960s were also a period of drug experimentation. His focus on mysticism and the Tantric state of Bardo, so much a part of the whole ethos of the decade, and its focus on the passage from life to death to some higher state, is evocative of the period with hallucinogenic drugs as a possible contributing factor. Despite Elaine's repeated statement that he committed suicide, sixteen years later in 1985, she solicited an official letter from Sidney's physician which reiterated that he had died of a heart attack. Could her request for more information than had been on his death certificate have been for insurance purposes? Suicide voided most policies at that time.

Whatever the case, the facts are that he died alone in his Chelsea studio at the age of 48, though one obituary said he died at home. He is buried in Mount Ararat Cemetery in Farmingdale, NY, where, ironically, according to Elaine, he met her years earlier and where 40 years after his death, Elaine was also buried.

He was survived by his father Morris, who died in 1972, and mother Esther, who died in 1974, his ex-wife Juliana Penn Gross, his wife Elaine and two sisters, Mae ('Mazie') Gross and Sylvia (Zeldie) Kaplan. He had no children.

Elaine Gross helped organize the half a dozen retrospective and memorial exhibits that followed his death, including a cataloged one at The Hague. But, in fairly short order moved on, leaving no one to nurture his estate or reputation. She did, however, document much of her first husband's career and its successes and donated many of his papers and sketches to the Art Students League who provided them to the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian. In time, Elaine donated over 100 of his paintings and many drawings to the Art Students League, which unfortunately is not an exhibiting institution. Many were large canvasses and have since been removed from their stretchers and most remain in storage, as do many of his paintings in museum collections. According to a former student, his landlord in Baltimore sold a number of unclaimed smaller paintings in a sidewalk sale for \$25-50 a piece, probably to cover the rent, which may well have escaped his new wife's notice.

Elaine went on to marry retired NYPD officer Lawrence Richman, took his name, but continued to live in New York in Sidney's and Elaine's old apartment on 95th Street. She

returned to her first love, her singing. Elaine August died in 2009.

## **Assessing his Place in Art**

Bernard Schiff, later to become curator of the Smithsonian collection, wrote in *The New York Post* “of the mature, seasoned and genuine painters ... who have been working in the non objective mode for some considerable years, one who strikes me consistently as being of major size and substance is Sidney Gross.” He went on to explain:

There is a concentration here of what I must call – paying proper respect to the words – a notable beauty; they are works of heroic force. Gross’ colors are magnificent. It is not a simple question of how they look but what, in a deeper sense, they do to the mind. They activate sensation and emotion; they stimulate thought and beyond that, connection and feeling. It is senseless to attempt in specific language to describe them, since one cannot really speak of the colors by themselves. They are not to be separated from the force of the shapes, symbols, motion and, indeed events which they describe and in their effect are. Gross’ paintings are dramas and sagas of experience and of feeling, descriptions at the moment of the very process of their being.

These are extravagant words because they are meant to be. Gross is a superb artist. His soul and mind and heart are in these works. This must be how thought, feeling and sensation at the instant of their becoming and Gross is able to give form and shape and visual materiality to these mysterious processes of the mind.

Almost equally dramatic was curator and critic Carl David’s assessment in the commentary on Gross’ 1949 painting in the Smithsonian:

Gross developed a range of styles, from realism in the 1930s, amorphism in the 1940s, and finally into geometric expressionism in the 1950s and 1960s. These works represent the culmination of his development, and evoke more vivid emotion than all others. Their colors are striking, and their compositions forceful. Combining abstract elements with his unique spatial perspective, the artist allowed his forms to float against a solid background, while presenting to the viewer a central formal element of harmoniously placed color, simultaneously separated from and integrated into it. ... Gross had a vision, a novel approach to what he perceived, and was fully able to integrate the bold and the subtle to create his interpretation of what was in his mind. He employed several devices and merged them into a synchronous blend of spatial effects. Gross was quite expert in his design, formatting his composition so that it would flow without dissonance. Every element appears inherently intertwined with another, and though there are several thematic levels operating at one time, they are definitively related, and all contribute to the end result.

In the December 1970 issue of *Arcade* magazine, Richard Teller Hirsch, director of the newly opened Museum of Fine Arts in Houston wrote in ‘The Painting Tells’, “Turning to the Michener Collection, UFOs #13 by the late Sidney Gross painted years before the moon landing, conveys much of the same intuition of the immensities around us, but in quite different terms: the earth-freed object assaulting the sun-filled universe.”

Critic James Mellow was a little more cautious: this “veteran painter and teacher” as

“a talented and disciplined artist whose works possessed solid virtues – fastidious craftsmanship and an emphatic gift for construction.” He praised his figurative work as “refreshing and somewhat whimsical”, noted his “tightly controlled version of abstract expressionism” and concluded that Gross “differed from his contemporaries in that ... he attempted a kind of amalgamation of these two contradicting modes.” He admired most the UFO series. Friend and fellow artist Leo Maso mourned the loss of “a force so rare in a mediocre and transient world.”

As one of the last critics in his era to pass judgment, Mellow said “even artists with popular reputations pass after their deaths into a limbo from which they are only rescued in time.” He added that a critic confronting a whole career without the benefit of time, offers “judgments and prejudices [that] may help to bury an artist whose life’s work deserves better.”

The caption on one of his paintings in the Art Students League notes: “In the 1940s, Gross used jewel tones and stylized forms to portray the docks and industrial scenes of New York City. By the early 1960s, he had forged a unique visual language that combined hard-edge and gestural abstraction, still in bold colors.”

The Art Students League donated his 1966 ‘Solar Rendezvous’ (84”x 66”) to the Wichita Art Museum. Their catalog describes the artist place:

One of the most accomplished and most promising exponents during the 1960s was Sidney Gross whose frequent New York exhibitions of his massive canvases were widely acclaimed until his untimely death.

Stylistically, Gross added a new dimension by introducing a hard-edge quality to splintery and irregular multicolored forms ... One of the most significant stylistic achievements of Sidney Gross ... was his extremely sensitive ability to harmonize the opposing romantic and classical poles of expression that for many centuries have dominated Western thought and the character of Western art, both in America and abroad ... What is especially interesting is that the entire composition suggests how space-age consciousness of the 1960 could find symbolic expression in a work of art in abstract form rather than in visually representational terms.

A recent article in Chinese appeared on ArtFinding website described his as an “artist of significance” and critiqued UFO #10 drawing on earlier critics words, noting (in loose translation) his “amazing colors ... ability to evoke emotions ... and unique perspective of space.”

From the beginning of his career, with his Blakean surrealism, his almost Renaissance approach to realism, in his tapestry-like use of muted colors in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and in his mature abstractions, Gross separated himself from many of his fellow Abstract Expressionist in his subtle use of color and color fields, and wonderfully layered paints, against which his expressionist slashes and thrusts vibrated. Artist Helen Thomas, who studied under Gross, wrote: “In reflecting over Western painting since the turn of the century, particularly with reference to the use of color, I feel

that Abstract Expressionism left an unfortunate legacy: a rather limited palette resulting from an unpremeditated selection of color.” Gross’s use of color was precise and conscious.

He also, perhaps unwisely, continued to change and experiment in many styles throughout his career. It may have served him well during his successful lifetime, but it makes him harder to characterize than say Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Andy Warhol, Norman Rockwell or others with highly recognizable subjects and styles and therefore easier for the top level art market to promote.

More recently, in December 2008, a large untitled oil painting by the artist was included in a travelling exhibit of work by teachers at the New York Art Students League. In a review of that exhibit, Ginger Lee Hendler of *Art Times* wrote,

I had the pleasure of viewing ‘Highlights from the Permanent Collection of the Art Students League’ at The Long Island Museum in Stony Brook, New York the week before it closed ... I was drawn to the spontaneous bursts of bold color, rhythmic play, and defiance of the four modernists in the furthestmost gallery. ... Sidney Gross’ “Untitled,” oil on canvas, echoed bold yellows and purples.

## **Hiatus to Obscurity**

It is ironic that just a few years after having been named one of the notable Young Artists USA, Sidney Gross died suddenly and unexpectedly, but that didn’t hamper the posthumous ‘careers’ of others who died before their prime. But unlike some of his contemporaries (like Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollack) whose work was carefully managed by their children, wives and dealers after their deaths, Gross’ was not and his visibility diminished over time.

His widow Elaine did make a brief effort helping to organize several memorial exhibitions in Baltimore and New York; and others in Provincetown, RI, Essex, Ct, and The Hague in Amsterdam. Rehn Gallery held two memorial exhibits as late as 1972 which was mentioned as “works by the notable abstract expressionist” and reviewed in *Arts Magazine* where it was illustrated with ‘UFO #5.’

But soon the Chorale returned as her focus. Over the next few years, she performed in it with Paul McCartney, Leonard Bernstein and other well-known musical lights. She eventually remarried and picked up a stepdaughter, though she continued to live in the apartment that had been home to Sidney since the 1940s.

In 1985 gallery owner Gertrude Stein appraised the Grosses at basically what they had sold for 20 years earlier. Later her gallery provided a venue for at least one more solo exhibition.

As mentioned earlier, the fact that he was and is not considered a “member” of the New York School played against him in the long run. Virtually, the works of all of those associated with the school have appreciated in value over the years. That tide did not include Sidney Gross’ work from those years.

Ironically, Frank K. M. Rehn's adoption and promotion of the young Sidney Gross played against his future reputation, for the Rehn Gallery's fame rested with the Ashcan School and Social Realists.

Perhaps, even more unfortunate was the shift in the Rehn Gallery's focus, before Sidney's death, but after the death of the founder. Existing records suggest that Clancy concentrated on the growing market for limited edition graphics and less expensive watercolors, hardly a venue for a painter whose work grew larger and larger and whose prices were proportionate. The gallery moved and changed names several times, finally closing in 1981 when John Clancy died. Had the gallery survived, its reputation still would have hinged on the important talents of a number of late 19th and early 20th century masters, whose estates were and continue to be active.

Another factor is that Gross never settled into a distinctive style long to make his work easily recognizable. The market tends to encourage and reward successful artists who continue to reproduce a identifiable "product." There are two schools of thought on whether such adherence to a singular style stifles the artist or reflects the artist's mature confidence in a personal vision. Around 1960, still in his 30s, Gross began set his colorful dynamic abstract forms against fields of color. He worked exploring that dynamic for the rest of his life, longer than in any other style. His Bardo series was to be the culmination of his career and that style simply by the fact of his untimely death. In fact, it may have contributed to his less than dramatic exit from the art world.

Of those last works, Mallow complained that in his "panels of expressionist painting and panels of hard-edged forms separated by fields of pure white – there was no resolution, only a simple confrontation." The Bardo series incorporate echoes of his powerful use of color and movement, but his decision to portray an intellectual concept and incorporate color theory was less successful than his earlier works which were built on their emotional content.

Had he lived, he might have created the synthesis he was seeking. He had taken the lessons of the social realists and developed a powerful surrealist twist, taken that and provided a vision of urban decay that offered hope, taken that to create abstractions of urban shapes and structures, filled them with mosaics of kaleidoscopic and took those colors into his strong expressionist paintings of the mid 1950s to 1960, paintings that I think added painterly skills and color complexity rare in the period. His UFO and Probe series and paintings like the one on this page began to juxtapose his abstract movement and forms against fields of color, work that some critics declared his best.

Sidney Gross' shortened career produced a body of strong and memorable work that still touches chords it did during his lifetime. He, himself, mused that it took "20 years for the public to catch up with the artist." Sidney Gross didn't get 20 years.

As we consider the changes globalization has forced on society and the natural

world from an early 21st century perspective, maybe there is no resolution, only confrontation.

## **The Teacher**

The artist Francia wrote, “ He energized me as an artist” and noted “he was upbeat and supportive of your ideas and goals as a painter.” This is clear in what he wrote of his student Yu Tian Cheu’s (1935-), Gross wrote: “His work has an enormously sensitive, tactile quality combined with a feel for very subtle colors. He uses collage elements in a very dynamic manner creating constantly varying solutions to formal problems. It is very difficult to find words to describe all the additive factors that combine to produce the mystery that accompanies his work.”

Gross taught summers at the Art Students League in 1958-59 and 1965-67 and full years from 1961 until his death, as well as at Columbia University from 1963-1967. In 1963 he also accepted a position at the University of Maryland at College Park where he also taught until his death. His biography in the 1967 ASL catalog concluded with this note: “Sidney Gross was an exceptionally popular Arts Student League instructor from 1958 to 1967.”

One measure of an artist is his/her acknowledged influence from students.

Former students, five exhibiting artists, one in advertising, and two (now painting dealers) recalled him fondly. They all described Gross as “inspirational” and one described him “as wild and dramatic” in his teaching methods. In 1980, artist Helen Thomas wrote in the magazine *Leonardo* about her experience with Gross in 1966 until he left: “Under Sidney Gross ... I changed from representational painting to the style of Abstract Expressionism ... exhilarating for me”. One of his students at Art Students League, Sigrun Mueller, wrote, “What I am still grateful for were his lectures downstairs in the League's basement studio about Josef Albers' color theory. It was mesmerizing how he made us see color and its relationship to other colors.” In a recent book on the artist Boh Beng Kwan, critic Lindy Poh wrote, “Under the artist-instructor Sidney Gross [1921-1969], Goh abandoned earlier representational modes and began experimenting in the style and forms of Expressionist Abstraction. Gross himself was painting successfully in the style of ‘Geometric Expressionism’ ... Gross’ style and approach had a conspicuous influence on Goh’s early canvases of 1962-64.”

On his website, noted Columbian Swiss artist Mario Volpe work is described as influenced by, among others, the “New York painting of the fifties ... and of his teacher at the Art Students League, Sidney Gross.” Noted Spanish artist Frederico Delgado Montiel (1929-) cited his influence as a teacher. In an essay on renowned Singapore artist Goh Beng Kwong (1937- ), who studied for two years under “under acclaimed artist Sidney Gross.” and that “inspired by Gross goh... and the vibrant New York art scene ... left representational painting behind for Abstract Expressionism.”

Singapore born artist Wong Keen (1942- ) considered Gross “an influential Abstract Expressionist artist.” Other artists who list him as an influence include Barbara Kerne (1936-), Harvey Dodd, Jeanette Alexander Judson (1912- ) whose early work shows a clear influence, Jessica Mitchell, Barbara Kern, Yu Chien Cheu (1935-), Herb Grika (1936- ), and Eric Alberts (1940-2010) who studied under him for five years and taught until his death at the League. London based Suzanne Perlman shows the influence of her studies with Gross even in her latest work in 2014.

Memorial services following Gross’ tragic death took place in New York and Baltimore. In both cities, his students took special pains, organizing an memorial exhibit at the University of Maryland, while the Art Students League donated a painting in his name to the Butler Institute of American Art.

In one eulogy from the Baltimore memorial, a student said, “In my light will always be reflected my teacher. His message to me was always personal – show the *I*. He was a big example of optimism in a world where too many forget we are not machines. Professor Sidney Gross was voted the University of Maryland Art Department’s most popular teacher,” not a bad tribute given his short tenure there.

## **The Man, the Artist ... in his own words**

The young Sidney Gross, judging by his notebooks, must have been extremely intense, and subject to bouts of depression and elation. While still in high school, he copied the texts of an the exchange of letters between Sigmund Freud and the Lutheran pastor Oscar Pfister wherein Freud famously described himself as “a godless Jew.” The passage, however, which struck the deepest chord may have been this: “I have found little ‘good’ about human beings on the whole. In my experience most of them are trash, no matter whether they publicly subscribe to this or that ethical doctrine.”

While in the army infantry training ten miles north of Paris, Texas, Gross, in a letter to his high school art teacher wrote:

I took a long walk into the fields far from camp. The further I walked, the more remote was New York and all the life I had known before this now. When I no longer could see the camp, I lay down in a yellow field, a sweet smelling ochre, laden with wild life, rife with a million busy lives - filled with a great variety of trees. The land moved out, wild, far as I could see. The sky rolled around it, vast, full of wispy, cottony cloud. There was a warm sharp wind, bending the grasses. At times it seemed to be blowing through me as though I had for a moment become one with the tall, stretching trees.

I thought of my niece, her dolls, her strange attachment to a tiny piece of blue cloth that she calls her moony. Her private, personal, interpretation of this world lived in the minute – her game is as meaningful as ours, more so. I am playing someone else’s game, one that has nothing to do with the exaltation or salvation of the individual.

The open racial prejudice, the cursing, swearing ignorance, the blind acceptance. ... Out there in the

intuitive simplicity of a white shaggy hound; it capers and dances in the air you breathe, the wild joy, you have unknowingly hoped for, the permanent release. The rasp-like wind bends you, then - one with the grasses and wild life – lowers you into the sweet bed of this earth, with athletic ease.

The crowded subway we must beware of hurtles you through a dark endless avenue, black with blind confirmation. The stations are all the same, full of weariness and the escapist games. Not to ride madly with the crowd going nowhere, but to walk alone, going somewhere! Into the earth, becoming the earth, winged and bodiless. You that lay there, a stranger to the earth, resting upon arms and hindsides aching in the lap of the War God - you have bourn long enough the wraths of this huge farce? Opposite, alone, longing for the warm inside of it all. Panting for the flying field, the skyward, earthward, soulward planes - to highways unknown!

- Camp Maxey, Texas – 12/25/1942

## **Bits & Pieces ... Random Notes on Art**

A small notebook filled mostly with sketches, customers' names, and art supplies opens with these words about his marriage in 1944 shortly after his discharge:

This book has in its insides a material corporeal record of two people who have entered into the state of matrimony in the year of our lord 1944 in the midst of war and dread horror which has [unclear]ed the guts of a world before our eyes

Early on, Gross made extensive notes on art history, including lists meticulously recording the dates of artists, juxtaposed with the dates of historical events, political developments, philosophers, and starting in the Renaissance, including the name of composers, poets, scientists and dates of their discoveries. More revealing come from his mature years. Lecture notes have survived that reveal Sidney Gross' thoughts on art. These are drawn are from his notes in the *Archives of American Art*, many from a symposium he gave on Color in 1968, shortly before his death.

## **The Artistic Impetus**

*"I have always been concerned with the highly disciplined, relational esthetic solutions regardless of how my execution may have changed over the years. This does not mean intellectual as opposed to intuitional. I do not think the creative process is either-or, but both-and."*

*"This act of wrenching away an object or concept from its habitual associative context and seeing it in a new content is an essential part of the creative process."*

*"Gesture has no precise edges, no exact shapes, no filled forms. You must be able to feel it with your body. You should draw not what the thing looks like, nor even what it is, but what it is doing."*

*"Art does not emerge from theory. The natural tendency to play and to explore coupled*



*with the necessity to deal with deep seated psychological problems is the raison d'être of the creative act."*

"We know what art can turn into when it becomes propaganda. It is possible to make sociopolitical statements as an artist, as long as the work can hold its own as a formal entity. It is very difficult, but it has been done."

*"The working artist is never resting, always seeking, and demanding things from himself. He sells pictures, but in his studio, he is always an amateur," for the "dissatisfaction we feel with our last picture sends us into the next picture."*

"In our age, the artist no longer "necessarily aim[s] to please the customer."

*"It takes a layman twenty years to catch up with what a painter is doing."*

*"The editor louses up the writer's manuscript, the maniacal conductor louses up the musician's masterpiece, but nobody touches the artist's picture!"*

## **The Role of Color**

*"You can control space with color, space is color, color creates space."*

"There are estimated to be 100,000,000 different color stimuli ... In order to use color effectively, it is necessary to recognize that color deceives continually."

*"Psychologists have a field day with signs & symbols in the plastic arts, but have been strangely mute when confronted by color & music. Color defied most reductionist approaches because it is essentially, I believe, visionary and anagogic. It is a mind-expanding substance and my feeling about it is reverential."*

## **Artists - Classic and Modern**

"Bonnard was a great academic draftsman and his naiveté was deliberate."

*"Goya, El Greco, Tintoretto and Gruenewald are all dealing with illusionism."*

*"The line between fine and commercial art is no longer drawn. Pop art did this."*

"Good art of the West is coming out of Oriental art and the signs and symbols found there."

*"The space that isn't objective becomes the important space in Oriental art ... They are concerned with the silences."*

*"Picasso is so direct. If he wants to pull a window shade down, he pulls it down." When "a critic said Matisse's paintings look like they were done by a 6 year old and Matisse was ... flattered."*

Of his near contemporary Jackson Pollock, whose work was "vilified as random nonsense, schizophrenic" he wrote that "Pollock's work is very controlled, lyrical and

*beautiful, almost like old masters.”*

*“Who seems closer to the physiological world - Jackson Pollock or Andrew Wyeth?”*

*“DeKooning does the hide and seek painting. Rauchenberg uses a complex series of elements, and Kelly uses a minimal solution. Both get a solution and that’s the important thing.”*

Human mortality and the fleeting nature of his own legacy echo in something he said during that lecture given in his final months: **‘Air in this room is overcrowded compared to the emptiness which we call a lectern and on which my arms are resting – This is the nature of reality.’**

- Sidney Gross

## Permanent Collections

Albright Art Gallery  
Allentown Museum of Art - 1967  
American Academy of Arts & Letters - Childe Hassam Fund - 2 paintings  
Baltimore Museum of Art - 1961, 1962  
Brandeis University -1956  
Butler Institute of American Art - 1953, 1961, 2004  
Walter P. Chrysler Museum - 1960  
Colby College - 1958  
Columbia University - 1962  
Cornell University - 1958  
Corcoran Gallery of Art - 1961  
Hebrew Home at Riverside -  
Israel Museum of Art - Jerusalem - 1965  
Guus Maris Collection  
James Michner Collection - University of Texas - 1967  
Lempert Institute - 20 paintings purchased 1948-52  
Morgan State College - 1961 - reproduction available  
Muscarella Museum of Art (College of William & Mary)  
Norfolk Museum of Art - 1962  
Northwestern University (Block Museum) - 1996  
Oklahoma Art Center - 1968  
Philbrook Art Center, - 1966  
Provincetown Art Museum -1969, 1985, 1989  
Princeton Museum - before 1953  
Mt. Holyoke University - 1950  
Michigan State University - 1960,1966  
Norfolk Museum 1961  
Riverside Museum - 1959, 1963, 1966  
Standard Financial Corporation 1958, 1959, 1960  
Smithsonian American Art Museum (3) 1975  
Syracuse University - 1963, 1965  
Washington Gallery of Modern Art - 1962  
Whitney Museum - purchases 1945, 1946, 1955  
Walker Art Center 1948?  
Wichita Art Museum - 1987  
University of Georgia - 1949  
University of Illinois - 1959  
University of Omaha - 1951  
University of Maryland 1965  
University of Rochester - 1966

## **Selected Invitational Exhibits**

Pennsylvania Academy of Art - multiple exhibits beginning 1945 and earlier when he was a student

Carnegie Museum of Art - multiple exhibits beginning 1945

Whitney Museum - multiple exhibits beginning in 1945

Armory Show - 1945

Brooklyn Museum - 1945

Frank Rehn Gallery, NYC - over 25 shows

Museum of Modern Art, New York - 1949, 1959, 1961

Corcoran Museum of Art - multiple exhibits

Jewish Museum, NYC

University of Nebraska

National Academy of Design - 1946, 1948

Toledo Museum of Art - 1947

Pepsi Cola Traveling Exhibit - 1945, 1946

Milwaukee Art Institute - 1946, 1951

Minneapolis Art Institute - 1946

Federation of Modern Painters & Sculptors - annually from 1947-67

Albright Art Gallery - 1947, 49, 1951

Hallmark Traveling Exhibit - 1949

Butler Institute of American Art - several exhibits beginning 1953

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts - 1949

Audubon Artists - annually from 1949-67

Metropolitan Museum of Art - 1950

Hallmark - National Tour - 1950-51

American Academy of Arts & Letters - 1950, 1955, 1958

Institute of Contemporary Art - Boston - 1951

Nelson Gallery - 1951

Detroit Institute of Art - 1951

Des Moines Art Center - 1951

Isaac Delgado Museum - 1951

Hallmark - European tour - 1952

Joslyn Art Museum - 1954

Brazil - Contemporary Arts - 1956

Riverside Museum - multiple since 1957

American Federation of Arts - National tour 1958-60

Zabriskie Gallery, NYC - 1958

Puerto Rico - 1959

Art USA - 1958, 1959  
Washington Gallery of MA - 1962, 1966  
National Institute of Arts & Letters - 1967  
Hillstrom Museum of Art, MN - 2007  
Long Island Museum at Stony Brook - 2008  
Gilbert Pavilion Gallery - 2011  
Davenport & Shapiro Fine Art - 2012-13

## **One Man Shows**

### **25 One man shows:**

Contemporary Art Gallery, NYC 1945-1959  
Tirca Karlis Gallery, Provincetown 1960, 1962  
Frank Rehn Gallery, NYC 1949, 1950, 1951, 1953, 1954, 1956, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1963,  
1965, 1967, 1969, memorial 1972  
Pinchpenny Gallery - Essex Ct 1985?  
Seasons Gallery, The Hague, The Netherlands 1977  
David David Gallery, Philadelphia 1991  
Gertrude Stein Gallery - 2000  
Davenport & Fleming Gallery 2007  
Memorial exhibits in New York City, Baltimore, and Providence, RI.

Sidney Gross is listed in *Who Is Who in the East*, *Who Is Who in America* annually from 1957 to 1967, *Who Is Who in American Art* from 1948 to 1969, and, after his death, in *Who Was Who in American Art*. Essays about his work appear in *Master Paintings from the Butler Museum*, *Catalog of the Whitney Collection*, and in *Permanent Collection of the Wichita Art Museum* as well as in exhibition catalogs of various museums and his one man shows, and a more recently in a monograph for an exhibit in the 1990s. Regular reviews and illustrations appeared in *Art News*, *Art Digest*, *Arts Magazine*, *American Art*, and most of the then almost a dozen New York area newspapers.

## **Notes on this Monograph**

It's hard to present an artist's work fairly dependent on only the public record which remains after his death, in Sidney's case, far too soon. We hope that those who stumble upon this obscure monograph, who may have known Sidney or can provide additional insight into his work will share your information or pictures. We'd love to start a dialogue, and we will continue to add to this biography on the web, until we bite the bullet on a second edition of this work, at which time we will update credits on any of the paintings included.

In the earlier print version of this biography, most illustrations are from over 200 slides taken of Sidney Gross paintings. We have gathered from several sources another 20 or so photographs

of paintings, and a good number of original sketches. You can obtain a copy of that full color monograph with over 50 examples of the artist's work for \$10, by contacting us through our website LSDArt.com.

We are indebted to the *New York Times* which has archived this period, the *Archives of American Art* at the Smithsonian, and the Hampton Library as part of the Suffolk County Library System, and more recently former students of the artist, Pam Koob, curator of the collection at the Art Students League, acquaintances of his wife Juliana Penn-Gross, and the stepdaughter of his last wife, Elaine Gross. Sidney Gross' widow Elaine's generous donation to the Smithsonian was critical to understanding this thoughtful and brilliant artist. Finally, I thank Geoffrey Fleming, Director of the Southold Historical Society, for locating many of the paintings, years of partnership, and help in research.

We beg indulgence for the condensations and interpretations of Gross's own words. As Sidney said, "The editor louses up the writer's manuscript."

Leonard & Gail Davenport  
PO Box 1404, Bridgehampton, NY 11932  
631-537-3324 - call first & leave messages  
631-834-6919 cell  
visit us at all of our websites:: <http://www.lsdart.com/>  
[www.leonarddavenportfinearts.com](http://www.leonarddavenportfinearts.com)

Feel free to copy and use anything we have written, though an acknowledgement would be appreciated. A link back to our test even more so! We release the content under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License and the GNU Free Documentation License.