



Arthur Levine

This catalog was produced
on the occasion of:

Arthur Levine
Pirate Treasure

An exhibition of paintings
on view April 26-May 21, 2022 at:

Prince Street Gallery
547 West 27th Street, Suite 504
New York, NY 10001

Hours: Tues–Sat 11am–6pm
www.princestreetgallery.com
Phone: 646.230.0246

Essay ©2022 Philip Allen

FRONT COVER:

Clouds (detail) 2021, acrylic on panel, 18 x 24 inches

Arthur Levine | Pirate Treasure



16th Century Galleon
2021, acrylic on panel, 36 x 24 inches

Arthur Levine's Pirate Treasure

Philip Allen

Each one of Arthur Levine's paintings offers a view of the world as if it were another, emerging from the surface or the depths beyond in eruptions of thickly encrusted paint that appear equally molten and static. Some might mistake Levine's work as having been created by an "Outsider"—as in Outsider artist, as in untutored in the strictest sense of the word. He is more aptly something of a knowing defector from current trends in Art. This is an artist who loves paint and orchestrates it in the way a composer might music. His disregard for the polished untroubled surface school of picture making is evident. He is a reverse excavator, piling on until he finds the nugget rather than digging a hole.

In his painting "Sixteenth Century Galley," a ship with hammered brass sails is plowing over a Green Glass Sea of nervously striated brush marks. The hyperactive surrounding paint compresses the ship in a multidirectional freeze

leaving it with the potential to break in several directions, one of which is into an implied front space where its prow vanishes as the stern is propelled forward by some masterly touches of intense ultramarine blue pocked onto the orange-yellow body of the vessel.

The sharp impasto strokes are ordered in such a way as to practically sculpt the forms as well as direct the eye emphatically where the painter wants it to go. Likewise, the improbable but internally logical color stacks up purposefully in such a way as to construct solid planes of space, and while giving emphasis to the putative subject of the painting, never seeks to eject it as a separate entity; in short, this painting is a visual whole across its entire surface. A large rectangular plane, cubist like, occupies the upper left of the painting, marked by a subtle continuation of the strong vertical of the hefty mast, now evaporated into its surround, to the top center of

the painting rendered in the colors of the enfolding, turbulent, sky. The rectangle's bottom extent is formed by a horizontal mast and sail thrust unexpectedly out to the leftmost edge of the painting. It is both a credible piece of the ship and a purely abstract triangular "stop sign" device whose rightmost limit forms the apex of a vertical picture length triangular compositional device. Another mast, with an unfurled sail, forms the rightmost edge of that triangle and as we continue to move right we discover that it is also the left edge of a powerful slanted bisecting slab that is propelled down from very near the top left corner of the painting into a receiving baseball mitt spiral of the ship's sails, which now reveal themselves to be configured like a four fingered hand, gripping that downward transferred energy as it pushes along the mast like St. Elmo's fire. That current continues into two yellow cable like elements descending to the water along the concave bulge of the ship's side and culminating as golden-capped foam in the ship's wake.

The sail constructed hand brings to mind certain paintings by Philip Guston, where a hand or paw grasps a bunch of brushes, or Jack Kirby's four fingered character "the Thing" caught in the process of making a fist. In the grip of this hand, mitt, paw, or bunch o' sails, there appears to be gripped a vertical blue trapezoid, ostensibly the part of the sails in shadow, but alternately a candy bar, or front row tickets to something. As it carries the upward thrust of the mast past the topmost brass sail to veer leftwards in a turquoise piece of the aforementioned bisecting slab, its energy is countered from the right by a pushy cloud like area of burnt umber pointed terre verte, the frontline of a series of four 45° bands of color parallel to the top sail and pushing up, or down from the right corner of the painting exerting enormous pressure on this immobilized ship, holding it motionless. This area receives much different paint handling

than elsewhere, less active, brushed out flat and seemingly more dense than the purposefully dancing strokes in most of the rest of the picture. This imparts a weight and sense of an almost solid obstacle.

The colors we naturally come to accept as appropriate in this picture are in fact very original and odd. Looking at the painting with an unfocussed stare one could be forgiven for thinking that the ship being presented was some sort of Rembrandtian helmet of the kind he loved to paint. We recognize the function of these sails but stumble over their metallic sheen and brass color. Many indicators speak to this being an actual ship plowing a wake in an actual body of water, while others render it as a brass table ornament, suddenly and magically enlarged and relocated as if by some supernatural power, a Jinn for example. That would make Levine something of an Aladdin. Strange magics are afoot and this, like other of his glittering objects, a bit of treasure snatched from a pirate's cave. If you can imagine a collaboration between George Rouault, J.M.W. Turner, Milton Resnick, Giorgio DiChirico, A.P. Ryder, Jan Van Goyen, Chardin, Leon Kossoff and early Cézanne you might begin to get a feeling for how unique these paintings look and feel. You would not know that they are acrylic paintings because there are none of the usual qualities of acrylic paint present in these works; in fact, they are so eminently painterly that if the question arose at all it could well be passed over as irrelevant.

Arthur Levine is somewhat obsessed by historic means of transportation. Sixteenth-century sailing ships, early 20th-century aircraft, submarines and temporally ambiguous dry-docked steel hulled vessels festooned with flags. They read partially like depictions of a boy's model toys from the 1930s or earlier, which inevitably raises the question of why exactly Mr. Levine has chosen these subjects as primary



Flags 2021, acrylic on panel, 19 x 24 inches



WWI Observation Balloon
2020, acrylic on panel, 16 x 23 inches

elements in his work. He does not bathe them in a glow of nostalgia; they are not a grasping after beloved artifacts of youth that an older person might see receding into history. In truth it's hard to tell what he intends by choosing them as focal elements in otherwise manifestly abstract land-sea scape-like paintings. Perhaps it is exactly an identifiable element that prevents the paintings from becoming purely non-objective Resnick-like compositions of pure color transitions, and atmosphere without a recognizable, stable object to focus on and gain purchase with. In truth it's hard to tell what he means by having chosen them as focal elements in otherwise manifestly abstract land-sea scape-like paintings. One could conclude that he uses them as a device for the orientation and comfort of the viewer, but I don't think that's what's going on. These paintings create such a convincing analogue to the real foggy, shifting, variously lit, drifting, atmospheres that our weathers and transitions of light serve up to the hyper attuned, that it starts to seem apparent that the artist is the one who needs the mooring of the real, lest he be dissolved into his own light. The fact that these contextually fragile boats, planes, submarines and even bridges all speak to the ability to move through threatening environments and survive, point to the possibility that they are stand ins for the artist himself. He is the passenger and pilot in threatening seas, in ominous skies. Safe landings are probable but never assured.

Chardin argued for the spatial coordinates of his ostensible subjects through a tense exchange with their surrounding color planes. The area usually dismissed as background is in fact a very live energy field with areas subtly pushing outward or receding across its surface in a coordinated dance with embedded objects or figures. It is an element of his work that functions on the very edge of perception, almost more felt than seen. Arthur Levine's moody, shifting,

abstract atmospheres are similarly calculated to speak to the object's place or intrusion, and may comprise the primary subject of these paintings. They are gorgeous expositions of a vocabulary of color that ranges from the most subtle closely related hues to the most dramatic extrusions of imaginative discontinuities. Levine is able to weave them together into a contiguous, stormy whole. Toned down cerulean abuts burnt sienna with tiny shards of cadmium lemon yellow and brush tip sized marks of something like a naphthol red, exerting upward pressure in counter to a descending cloud piece where needed. Raw sienna, turquoise, viridian and olive green grays, with Prussian blue hover, then fall into a spray of cadmium yellow light with touches of green and orange, which borders a horizon of various greens in his painting "WW1 Observation Balloon," the strangest painting of the group currently being considered.

There is no getting away from the phallic association incurred by the wild, mysterious form dominating this painting's center, and further investigation will reveal photos of these observation balloons that appear for all the world like Macy's Day Parade floats of giant penises. Alternately, though, they have a Moth pupae resemblance that—for those raised on 1950s Monster movies—leaves us convinced that Tokyo destroying Mothra is about to emerge. It also looks like none of the above but some strange airship like invention setting off into threatening skies, its sails tied down. Clearly it must have been the bizarre ambiguity of these balloons that made them appealing as a subject. Most certainly in an Art world obsessed with novelty and ever more ineffectual forays into attempts at being shocking, here's something you definitely don't see every day. This strange apparition hovers over a landscape pitted with what could be trenches, roads, or rivers and the aspect of a world awakening from the night or falling back into it. Moving from top to bottom and bisecting the

balloon is a centrally located pink cloud or mark, aligned with the near center downward pointing triangle created by the balloon's guide ropes and culminating at the painting's lower edge by an upward pointing muddy orange and grey triangular hillock.

Paint texture is a paramount feature here and in all of Levine's work. One could say that sections are mushed rather than brushed or stroked on and every painting has accrued quite a considerable density of paint, leaving the surface a rough topographic map of impulses, a record of process that takes on an organic almost vegetal quality, as if made of moss and lichen, grown rather than directed into being. They have, in a word, "THINGHOOD"—that quality that good painters sometimes achieve of making a painting whose means make it appear as if it might always have existed. The question of how the painting was made becomes irrelevant and unanswerable, probably, including by the painters themselves. His paint not only has actual physical height, it also often seems to advance towards the viewer via his drawing and color choices and

placements. There are also the apparently simple compositional structures he employs, one object against a field, sometimes clearly delineated as a landscape with a horizon, sometimes suspended in a sky of buffeting color modulations. His choice of material has also determined a good deal of their final look. Levine uses acrylic paint with a copious mixture of gloss medium or varnish so that the surface is sparkling, refracting light in a thousand directions, making them even more oddly mysterious. Yes, there are echoes of Ryder and his peculiar asphalt painted cracked seascapes with ships battling the elements, and Rouault with his piled up surfaces, imagined lighthouses, and shrouded religious figures, Resnick with his deep impasto fields of subtly shifting color, and middle period Guston, with forms simultaneously subsumed and emerging from his super energetic groundwork of luscious paint strokes. All these could be cited as influences or as fellow travelers down a path of painters for whom image and the physicality of paint are inseparable, and the image within the image that is the painting itself evokes some internal psychological, spiritual identification.



Great Harry (after drawing by Holbein)
2019, acrylic on panel, 20 x 27 inches





Three Freighters 2018, acrylic on panel, 17 x 22 inches

LEFT:

Ship Foundering 2021, acrylic on panel, 18 x 22 inches

International Spy Thriller 2021, acrylic on panel, 19 x 26 inches





German WWI Fighter 2020, acrylic on panel, 18 x 23 inches



Cruiser Hull 2018, acrylic on panel, 17 x 24 inches





Bridge With Sailboats (detail)
2020, acrylic on panel, 24 x 32 inches



Railroad Overpass 2019, acrylic on panel, 17 x 24 inches

RIGHT:

Monoplane 2020, acrylic on panel, 23 x 29 inches





LEFT:
Cowboy Movie 2022, acrylic on panel, 16 x 20 inches

RIGHT:
French Trawler 2019, acrylic on panel, 24 x 20 inches



17th Century Shipyard 2020, acrylic on panel, 20 x 28 inches





LEFT:
15th Century Spanish Galleon 2018, acrylic on panel, 16 x 22 inches

RIGHT:
Harbor Towers 2019, acrylic on panel, 24 x 16 inches







Over the Ocean 2020, acrylic on panel, 16 x 24 inches

LEFT:

Clouds 2021, acrylic on panel, 18 x 24 inches

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2022 Prince Street Gallery, New York, NY
2017 Prince Street Gallery, New York, NY
2014 Prince Street Gallery, New York, NY
2012 College of Staten Island, Cuny, New York, NY
2012 Prince Street Gallery, New York, NY
2009 Prince Street Gallery, New York, NY
2006 Prince Street Gallery, New York, NY
2002 55 Mercer Gallery, New York, NY
1994 55 Mercer Gallery, New York, NY
1988 College of Staten Island, Staten Island, NY
1987 Anna Swenson Gallery, Brattleboro, VT
1987 Patricia Heesy Gallery, New York, NY
1984 Alliance Francaise, Toronto, Canada
1984, 80, 78 Prince Street Gallery, New York, NY
1967 Ceeje Galleries, New York, NY
1966, 63 Ceeje Galleries, Los Angeles, CA
1960 Beloit college, Beloit, WI

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

National Academy Museum Invitational, New York, NY
Society for Contemporary Art, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago IL
Los Angeles County Area Exhibition, Los Angeles, CA
Detroit Institute of Art
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
Butler Institute of Art, Youngstown, Ohio
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA
Salon de Mai, Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris France
Walker Art Center, St. Paul, MN
Prince Street Gallery, NY, NY

City University of New York, NY, NY
National Drawing Invitational, Santa Rosa Junior College, Santa Rosa, CA
Patricia Heesy Gallery, NY, NY
"Art on Paper" Invitational, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of NC

COLLECTIONS

Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Walker Art Center, St. Paul, MN
Bradley University, Peoria, IL
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN
University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA
State of Illinois Collection, Springfield, IL
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Franklin Pierce College, Rindge, NY
E.F. Hutton, New York, NY

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

1993 Fellowship in Painting, National Endowment for the Arts
1981 City University of New York, Research Grant
1971 City University of New York, Research Grant
1963 University of California, Faculty Fellowship
1958 University of Illinois, Faculty Fellowship
1950 Fulbright Grant, Paris, France

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

1968–96 College of Staten Island City University of New York
1960–68 UCLA, Los Angeles, California
1956–60 University of Illinois, Urbana–Champagne

EDUCATION

1950–52 Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, France
1950 MFA University of Iowa
1949 BFA University of Iowa

*Special thanks to Phil Allen,
John Goodrich, Petey Brown,
Lily Arzt, Ellen Levine, Julia
Levine, Grant Drumheller,
Karina Drumheller, Elizabeth
Bisbing and Stewart Siskind,
all of whom contributed so
much to making this exhibition
and catalog possible.*

Catalog design: John Goodrich

