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‘War and Peace’ Imagined in Vivid Narratives by Social Surrealist Irving Norman

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2 DAYS AGO

A Polish émigré who survived World War I and later volunteered as a machine gunner in the Spanish Civil War, Irving Norman studied at the Art Students League of New York during the 1940s. While there, he was exposed to American social surrealists including James Guy and O. Louis Guglielmi, and many of their left-leaning counterparts from Europe (including André Breton), who were fleeing due to the onset of a second world war. Norman was a political radical from the very beginning. His otherworldly figurative works are inspired by the intensity and expressionism of earlier masters like Matthias Grünewald, Hieronymus Bosch, and Jan Brueghel the Elder. His commitment to narrative genre, unequivocally mobilized to deliver scathing social critique by representing the dark side of modern life, was unfashionable during the era that gave rise to American Abstract Expressionism, and furthermore, was executed vividly enough to earn the artist and his wife FBI surveillance for two decades. This September, the late Norman is featured in “Irving Norman: War & Peace. Monumental Paintings, 1969–1986” at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in Chelsea.

Of his work, Norman has said: “We are faced with so much that is unknown, so many unanswered questions ... It’s human nature to look for answers, to investigate, but in developing answers, we create illusions. I try to go beyond illusions, to tell the truth. I go deep, I go high, I go wide.” This sentiment at the root of his passionate vision still resonates today.

The exhibition takes its title from the show’s centerpiece, the epic triptych drawing *War and Peace* (1965), rendered in graphite on illustration board. Its main panel depicts two bare-chested, colossal warriors confronting each other in battle as the concrete foundations of the surrounding civilization crumble beneath their feet. This stark drawing—anti-heroic in its ambitious vision and refined detail—establishes those themes central to his later production, including the horrors of war, exploitation of the masses, the dehumanizing effect of the urban environment, and the unfortunate consequences of technology, visualized through a symbolic lexicon of naked humanoid figures, prison cell windows, skulls, and throngs of the suffering caged in towering skyscrapers and other confined spaces. Still other richly colored canvases on view reflect—forebodingly, yet brilliantly—on the objectivity of jurisprudence (*Supreme Justice*, 1974), the perceived security of industrial technology (*Airport*, 1972), and the authority of institutions (*Monumental*, 1969), by framing unwieldy moral questions in hauntingly human terms.

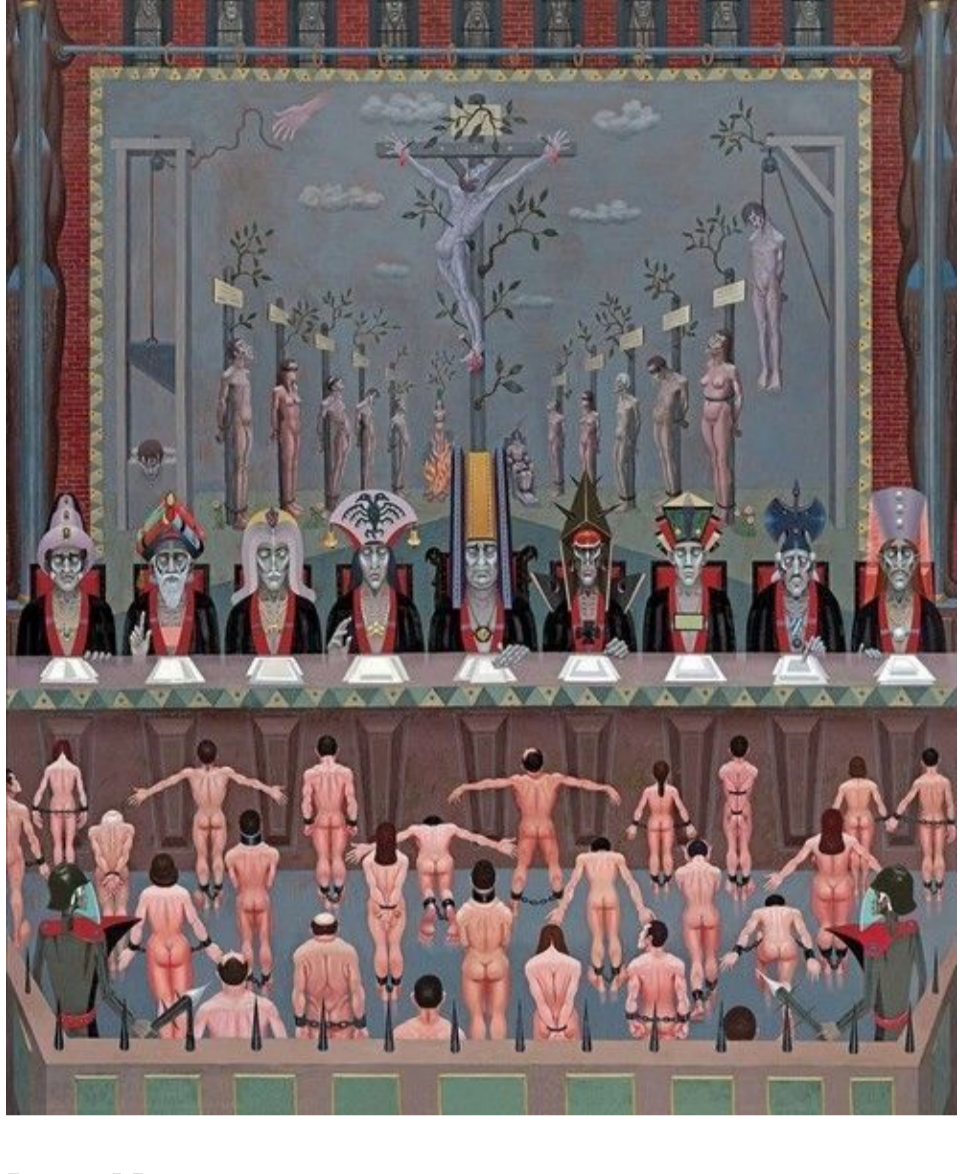
“Irving Norman: War & Peace. Monumental Paintings, 1969–1986” is on view at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, Sept. 6th–Oct. 25th, 2014.

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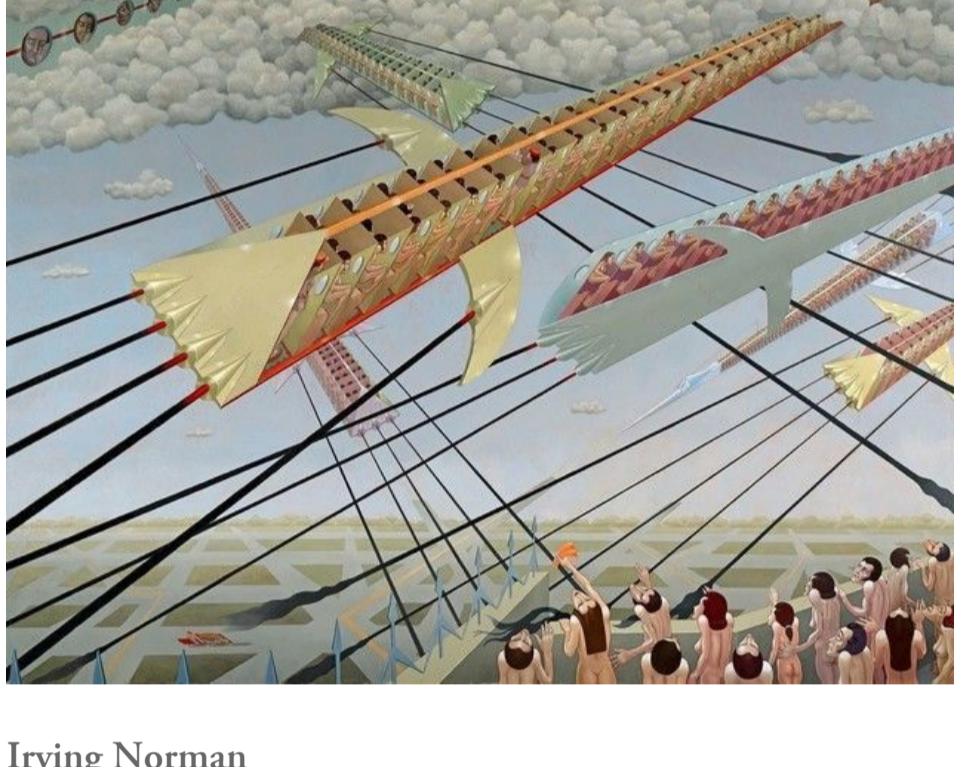
Irving Norman
War and Peace, 1965
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

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Irving Norman
Supreme Justice, 1974
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

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Irving Norman
Airport, 1972
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Monumental, 1969
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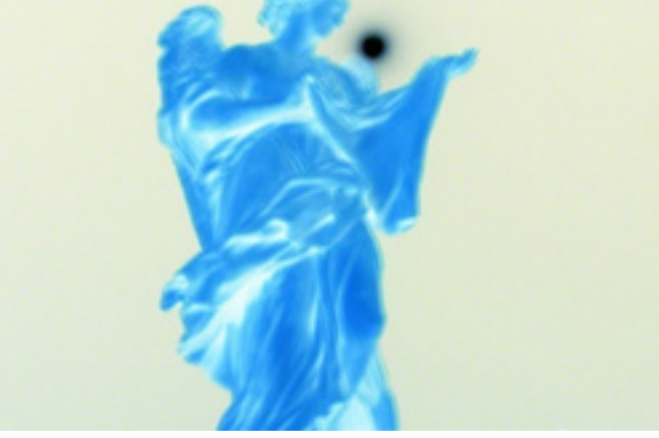
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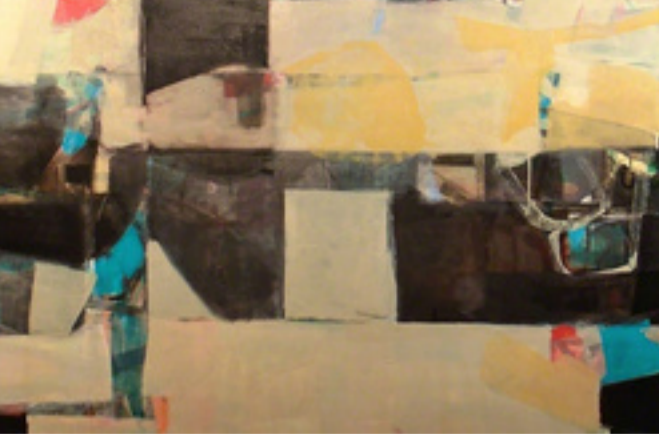
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