

W. Lee Savage (1928-1998) Various Works***Grandma***

acrylic & pencil on wood, 1973
1974 Museum Purchase

Dimensions: image, (h) 11 ¼" x (w) 11 ¼"

Three Graces

oil on canvas, 1984, 2001
Gift of William & Sarah Drennen

Dimensions: image, (h) 48 ¼" x (w) 36"

Ulysses (Night Town)

etching on paper, ed. 8/40, 1992
1992 Museum Purchase, Albert & Helen Thalheimer Fund of the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation

Dimensions: image, (h) 8 7/8" x (w) 11 ¾"

James Joyce

etching on paper, ed. 13/40, 1992
1992 Museum Purchase, Albert & Helen Thalheimer Fund of the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation

Dimensions: image, (h) 8 7/8" x (w) 11 ¾"

Beer Party

pastel on paper, 1986
1987 Gift of the Artist

Dimensions: image, (h) 21 ½" x (w) 27 ½"

Introduction

The Avampato Discovery Museum permanent collection contains a number of works by Lee Savage, a native of Charleston, WV. He received a number of important national awards during his career, including many for his work as a film-maker in the 1960's and 70's. His paintings are in several permanent collections throughout America, including The Whitney Museum, New York and the Hirshhorn Museum in DC. His final one-person show was held in his native Charleston at Sunrise Museum in 1994. The paintings held by the Avampato Discovery Museum

are typical of Savage's later work, with sketchy fluid lines and muted colors. The Museum also holds several of Savage's etchings.

The Artist

Born in 1928 in Charleston, West Virginia, Savage attended West Virginia University for two years and then moved to New York City where he attended the Pratt Institute and The Art Students League. Later, he was the Art Director for a publishing firm and then an advertising firm in New York. In 1961 he moved his family to England for a year where he painted full-time. In the same year he had his first solo exhibition, from which Joseph Hirshhorn bought 13 pieces.

On his return to the United States a year later he began to receive recognition for his work and was featured alongside Andy Warhol, Andrew Wyeth, Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg in a 1963 CBS documentary entitled *New American Painters*. Back in New York, he became partner in Elektra Films and the following year, founded his own film production company, Savage-Friedman Inc. with Harold Friedman. He wrote, produced and directed several films between 1964 and 1971, when he retired from the company to work independently in film and animation. His strongest work was made from the 1970's onward as he began to concentrate more on his painting. He participated in numerous group exhibits and had many solo shows, including a large retrospective of his work in 1994 at Sunrise Museum in Charleston, WV.

Style

Savage's style is hard to categorize and does not fall into any one movement of the 20th century. His work is often characterized by a fluid use of line and a vibrating energy; his subjects positively tremble. Perhaps this relates to his extensive experience working in film and animation. The organic, heavily worked forms and particularly the faces of the figures in his paintings seem so alive that one almost expects them to become animated. He made no effort to disguise the fact that many of his quirky portraits of writers and artists were taken from photographs, a common practice among artists in the second half of the twentieth century.

Stylistically, Savage's work is most closely allied to realism, and yet in works such as *Three Graces* there is a clear abstraction of shape, color and form. Similarly, the unfinished quality in *Grandma* detracts from the realism of the image, suggesting that accurate representation of his subjects was not something of key importance to the artist. It seems that Savage was as comfortable with a degree of abstraction in his work, as he was with a highly representational approach. There is a stylized quality to all of Savage's figures. He has been described as a "romantic realist."

Discussion

In *Grandma* the subject, is placed centrally within the composition. Loose, fluid line to describe



the contours of the figures clothing and a wash of shadow adds some solidity to her linear form. The wash background gives the impression of a stained or sepia antique photograph, and provides a neutral ground for the subject's precisely painted pink face. Her solid build and dour appearance suggest that she is a powerful matriarch. The absence of color in the figure and armchair give the subject a somewhat ghostly, transparent appearance. Perhaps this is the way Savage remembered his grandmother, in faded, shadowy memories, an idea that is reiterated by the unfinished areas of the painting.

Three Graces, an oil on canvas painting from 1984 is one of Savage's more abstract works, typical of his painting style of the 1980's, in which he captured the spirit of his subjects with muted colors and blurred lines. Said to be one of the artist's favorites, its strength lies in the symmetrical composition and limited palette. The subject of the painting is three African American figures, two adults and a child, probably 3 generations of the same family who were all named "Grace." The stark contrast between their skin tones and pale blue dresses, against the equally blue sky, creates a bold rhythm of shapes. There is the same subtly intense energy in the brushwork, and an over-painting in areas that gives the impression of movement. This can be seen in the face of the child in the center, which resembles a blurred photograph in which the subject moved at the last moment. Savage excels at capturing the movement and energy that makes his figures animated.

In the title *Three Graces* Savage plays upon the classical theme of three goddesses who were the personification of charm, grace and beauty. His "Graces" are formally posed, and unlike *Grandma* they appear uncomfortably confined by the edges of the canvas, or perhaps the original edges of the photograph from which the artist undoubtedly worked. Though perhaps not graceful in the classical sense, they have great presence and clearly a strong demeanor. The absence of facial details and expression adds a degree of mystery to the relationships between the subjects and their feelings. The little "Grace," appears uncomfortably squashed between her solid companions, but the triangle formed by her dark skin against their ample hips creates a perfect balance to the other dark forms in the composition. Were it not for the few areas of brilliant sunlight that fall on the left figure, the composition would appear quite flat and certainly more abstract.



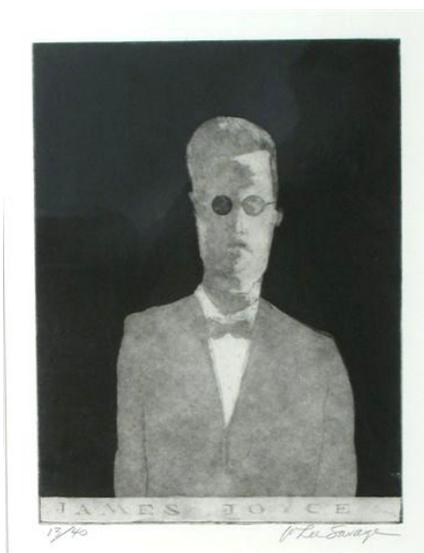
The pastel drawing *Beer Party*, 1986, was taken from an ordinary historic photograph found in a book entitled *Louisville in the 20's*, which showed a group of Caucasian men with wine glasses on the table. In a comedic re-working of the photograph, Savage switched the racial identities of the patrons and changed the glasses to beer bottles, thus raising issues of class, race and historical correctness.



Like *Three Graces*, the composition is virtually symmetrical, although the artist deliberately avoided perfect symmetry, which would be unnatural and compositionally dull. Savage uses strong linear perspective to draw the viewer's eye back to the vanishing point above the man at the head of the table, who is flanked by the two waiters. The gaze is then redirected, as all the men at the table face the viewer. A limited palette of complimentary red, green, black and white, forms a backdrop for the color of the men's skin; the conceptual focus of the work.

Two etchings held by the Avampato Discovery Museum are from a 1992 series on James Joyce, a continuation of the artist's almost obsessive portrayal of Joyce and his characters. Here, he uses fluid contour lines with mid-tones and deep, velvety black aquatints. There is an illustrative quality to the etchings, and in *Ulysses*, an interesting use of space, with a symmetrical divide to the image, and two clear spatial planes joined by the women of Nighttown, Dublin's red-light district. In the portrait of Joyce, the same dense black surrounds the figure, which is decidedly less animated in this more formal portrait. He wears a stern expression and the dark glasses which are seen in a lot of Savage's portraits, though Joyce was known to wear dark glasses later in life, when he suffered with poor eyesight and glaucoma.

The printmaking process is something many artists explore as it allows them to gain more exposure, and also make more money from an image by "editioning" a limited number of prints. These images were both printed in relatively small editions of 40. Etching is very close to drawing, and allows the artist to create a full range of marks such as those Savage used in *Ulysses* – linear, solid and tonal. Making an etching requires drawing the image on the metal plate in reverse, and so particularly when text is involved; the artist must plan the image carefully. The indentation seen in the edges of the image is where the plate and dampened paper were forced through the etching press in the printing process.



"James Joyce" etching on paper, ed. 13/40, 1992

"Ulysses (Night Town " etching on paper, ed. 8/40, 1992.



The subject matter of Lee Savage's work varies from family and friends, to still life, and often, his heroes, Joyce being the most often represented in his "imagined portraits." One of his last works was a series entitled *Nine Portraits of Famous Men* and included Stravinsky, Brecht, Modigliani, Vincent van Gogh, and of course, Joyce. He worked from photographs in order to portray his heroes, but cleverly overcame the stiffness that is often seen in drawings or paintings made from photographs. Photographs merely played a facilitating role, and he did not allow himself to be dominated by the original. Releasing those subjects from the confines of the frozen image, Savage was able to give them a newfound palpable energy and presence.

Sources

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