John Himmelfarb
Recent Paintings & Prints

Inland Romance: Cal Sag Romp

Robert T. Wright
Community Gallery of Art
College of Lake County
John Himmelfarb: Recent Paintings & Prints

By Lisa Stein

John Himmelfarb’s recent paintings and drawings reflect his long-lived passion for shape, color, and above all, line. Whether sinuous and sure or jagged and edgy, Himmelfarb’s lines travel through interlocking fields of color, navigate dense layers of jumbled shapes, and fashion themselves into vaguely familiar calligraphic marks. Most importantly, these lines serve as guides on a journey punctuated by recognizable signposts. As in many of the works from Himmelfarb’s 35-year career, abstraction gives way here and there to figuration: a door, a stoplight, a ladder emerging from a jumble of color. This synthesis captures the sense of experience met head-on and openhearted, a generous response to the pulsing rhythm Himmelfarb finds even in ordinary views.

The son of two painters, Himmelfarb grew up in the woods of Winfield, Ill., in a household that was, by his own description, fixated on modernism. His parents attended Jean Dubuffet’s seminal 1951 lecture, “Anticultural Positions,” at The Arts Club of Chicago, in which Dubuffet asserted the primacy of the unconscious in creating wholly original art. They introduced their young son to Dubuffet’s works, which became a favorite of his from an early age. As he grew up, Himmelfarb was also influenced by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Joan Miro, and eagerly absorbed the tenets of abstract expressionism. He admired in particular Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Arshile Gorky. Later on he began to incorporate pop art’s use of flat color, while continuing his fascination with art brut. Throughout his career, he has cycled through these various influences, flipping from representation to abstraction, from a black-and-white palette to color, from large to small canvases, and then back again. Along the way he has created a fusion that is entirely his own, a unique visual language that confronts the viewer with abundance and vitality.
Inland Romance: Canaryville, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
40” x 50”
The large, acrylic paintings on view belong to two series: *Icon*, which also includes several of the exhibition’s prints, and *Inland Romance*. The latter now comprises roughly 130 works completed in the last decade. They spring in part from his fascination with the hard-edged, industrial landscape surrounding his studio on Chicago’s near South Side. There one finds massive cranes straddling tracks that bear hundreds of train cars and enormous containers ready to be transported across the city, the state, or the country. Rambling warehouses and junkyards sit on the edges of wide, lonely boulevards and send out glints of steel on sunny days. Above this landscape soars the Midwestern sky, which shows up as a wedge at the top of the canvases in *Phil’s Brake and Scrap* and *Canaryville*.

The paintings’ titles often refer to specific Chicago neighborhoods that the artist explored as a young man, and their imagery is based on his memories. *Canaryville* presents lavishly hued, rectangular shapes jostled, ripped apart, and piled askew. The scene is viewed through arched portals and overlaid with a series of red and dark brown looping ladders that traverse the canvas from top to bottom. The scene resembles some sort of rough-and-tumble urban playground, gritty yet tempting nonetheless.

*Cal-Sag Romp*, which takes its name from the 56-mile-long canal system that winds through Chicago and its environs, is equally high-spirited but also less dense and more lyrical. Spherical, plant, and biomorphic shapes float against a light blue and lavender background, sharing space with industrial forms such as a portion of a brick wall, a bridge, and a rooftop vent. The work conveys the impression of natural and mechanized realms coexisting peacefully, at least for the time being. *Cal-Sag Romp* shows the influence of Surrealist master Miro in its whimsical shapes and playful, even joyful, approach.
Inland Romance: Distribution, 2003,
Acrylic on canvas
38” x 60”
"For me a form is never something abstract; it is always a sign of something ... For me painting is never form for form’s sake,” Miro once said. Like Miro, Himmelfarb relies on the visible world for generating forms, shapes, and lines in his art. Take a look at *Phil’s Brake and Scrap*, which was inspired by the shape of a brake shoe and includes references to a truck, a cart, and a signal tower. Himmelfarb repeats the shape across the horizontal canvas over and over until it becomes a veritable field of red, yellow, blue, striped, and polka-dotted arches that gleefully represent the original form.

While form in Himmelfarb’s oeuvre always refers to something in the outside world, color never does. Color is about nothing but the paint itself, serving solely as a building block within the work. Himmelfarb, who played violin and piano, uses color much like a composer uses notes in a musical composition. After employing a certain color to establish a dominant melody, as it were, the artist ushers in a counterpoint with another color and works off the tension generated between the two. *Sangamon*, for example, offers red and blue contrasted both as sprawling forms in the foreground and as softer, muted areas in the background. Music, in fact, influences much of Himmelfarb’s output, from his paintings’ rhythmic patterns to their sense of movement, whether unhurried or frenetic.

The compelling *Intermodal Transfer*, whose jazzy title refers to the hand-off of goods from one form of shipment to another, serves as a kind of intermediary between the playful clutter of paintings such as *Sangamon* and the electrifying *Hot and Cold*. A red, scraggy, multi-limbed form juts up from the bottom of the canvas, surrounded by and overlapping a latticework of black lines. The painting appears simultaneously to be the awakening of a great, violent beast swinging its arms as well as a distorted street map of a city.
Inland Romance: Phil's Brake and Scrap, 2000
Acrylic on canvas
48” x 141”
Inland Romance: Sangamon, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
38" x 60"
Hot and Cold harks back to Himmelfarb's Meeting series from the mid-1980s in which he explored pairings of figures. The painting bristles with a confrontation between two spiky forms—maybe cranes or the profiles of two monsters, maybe not. The larger form on the right rises up and clamps down on the smaller in what seems to be an act of aggression. The forms themselves are made up of smooth-edged shards embedded in saturated red and outlined in black and beige against a cobalt background.

While Himmelfarb's paintings mine the realms of emotion and experience, his lithographs investigate the connection between drawing and language. Inspired by commercial signage as well as ancient alphabets, these prints are controlled, pithy, and imbued with a sly sense of humor. They present collections of hieroglyphs, either arranged haphazardly Apple Tail Double Dog present pictographs, some of which are instantly recognizable and others that remain mysterious, anchored in jewel-toned settings and composed into the forms of a coffee cup and a stylized dog, respectively. Himmelfarb often recycles his pictographs; the coffee cup from Pie and Coffee, for instance, shows up in the front paw of Apple Tail Double Dog.

From his paintings that burst with energy to his smoothly executed prints, Himmelfarb continues to impress with his versatility and skill in a range of media. In a contemporary art world that often rewards cynicism and style over substance, Himmelfarb's works engage viewers in a visual celebration of life and an offering of thanks for the opportunity to create.

Lisa Stein writes about art for ArtNews magazine and the Chicago Tribune.
Inland Romance: Hot and Cold, 2004
Acrylic on canvas
38" x 60"
John Himmelfarb

RESIDIES
Chicago, Illinois

EDUCATION
1968  BA Liberal Arts, Harvard University

SELECTED AWARDS
2002  Illinois Arts Council Grant
1989  Chicago Artist Abroad
1986  Pollack-Krasner Foundation
1985  National Endowment For The Arts

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2005  Jean Albano Gallery, Chicago, IL (also exhibited 2000, ’98, ’96)
2004  African Art: The Diaspora and Beyond, South Shore Cultural Center Fine Art Gallery, Chicago, IL
2003  Inland Romance: Theme and Variation, Cook County Administration Building, Chicago, IL
2003  Sound and Vision: John Himmelfarb & Philip Trustium, Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch, New Zealand
2001  Lukacs Gallery, Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT
2000  Chicago Breaks, Galerie d’Art Contemporain, Paris, France
1999  Gallery 72, Omaha, NE (also exhibited 1997, ’94, ’92, ’90, ’85)

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2004  Wet Paint: John Himmelfarb, Jeffery Keith & Michael Rubin,
      William Havu Gallery, Denver, CO
2002  John Woodward Gallery, New York, NY
1997  Comunicazioni Visive Tramite Connessioni Globari, Museum of Contemporary Art, Pal. Massare, Ferrara, Italy
1996  Cultured Pearl, Metropolitan Museum of Seoul, Seoul, Korea
1994  Plats D’Artists, Fundacio Tallers Josep Llorens Artigas, Gallifa, Spain

SELECTED COLLECTIONS
Art Institute of Chicago
British Museum, London, England
Brooklyn Museum
Centre Pompidou, Musee D’Art Moderne, Paris, France
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University
Milwaukee Art Museum
National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC
New York Public Library, New York, NY
*Pie and Coffee*, 2004
Screenprint,
29 3/4” x 21 3/4”

*Apple Tail Double Dog*, 2004
Screenprint
29 3/4” x 21 3/4”
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Exhibition Checklist

_Inland Romance: Cal Sag Romp_, 2004
Acrylic on canvas, 42” x 62”

_Inland Romance: Hot and Cold_, 2004
Acrylic on canvas, 38” x 60”

_Inland Romance: Main Idea_, 2004
Acrylic on canvas, 38” x 60”

_Inland Romance: Distribution_, 2003
Acrylic on canvas, 38” x 60”

_Inland Romance: Green Space_, 2003
Acrylic on canvas, 38” x 60”

_Inland Romance: Intermodal Transfer_, 2003
Acrylic on canvas, 38” x 60”

_Inland Romance: Regional_, 2003
Acrylic on canvas, 24” x 36”

_Inland Romance: Canaryville_, 2002
Acrylic on canvas, 40” x 50”

_Inland Romance: Sangamon_, 2002
Acrylic on canvas, 38” x 60”

_Inland Romance: Phil’s Brake and Scrap_, 2000
Acrylic on canvas, 48” x 141”

_Mobilcaster_, 2003
Acrylic on canvas, 48” x 48”

_Paintbrush_, 2002
Acrylic on canvas, 52” x 48”

_Scopic Topic_, 2002
Acrylic on canvas, 52” x 48”

_Apple Tail Double Dog_, 2004
Screenprint, 29 3/4” x 21 3/4”

_Pie and Coffee_, 2004
Screenprint, 29 3/4” x 21 3/4”

_Walker_, 2004
Screenprint, 29 3/4” x 21 3/4”

_Chapeau_, 2003
Lithograph, 22” x 30”

_Theory_, 2001,
Five color screenprint, 41” x 28 1/2”

_Practice_, 2001
Five color screenprint, 41” x 28 1/2”

_RGB Cool_, 2000
Five color screenprint, 41” x 28 1/2”

_RGB Happy_, 2000
Screenprint, 41” x 28 1/2”

_RGB Mine_, 2000
Screenprint, 41” x 28 1/2”

All works courtesy of Jean Albano Gallery, Chicago, IL
John Himmelfarb

Recent Paintings & Prints
March 4 – April 10, 2005

Gallery Hours:
Mon-Thu 8:00 am-9:00 pm
Fri/Sat 9:00 am-4:30 pm
Sun 1:00-5:00 pm

Spring Break Hours:
March 28-April 1, 8:00 am-4:30 pm
Closed Mar 27 (Sun) & Apr 2-3 (Sat/Sun)

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