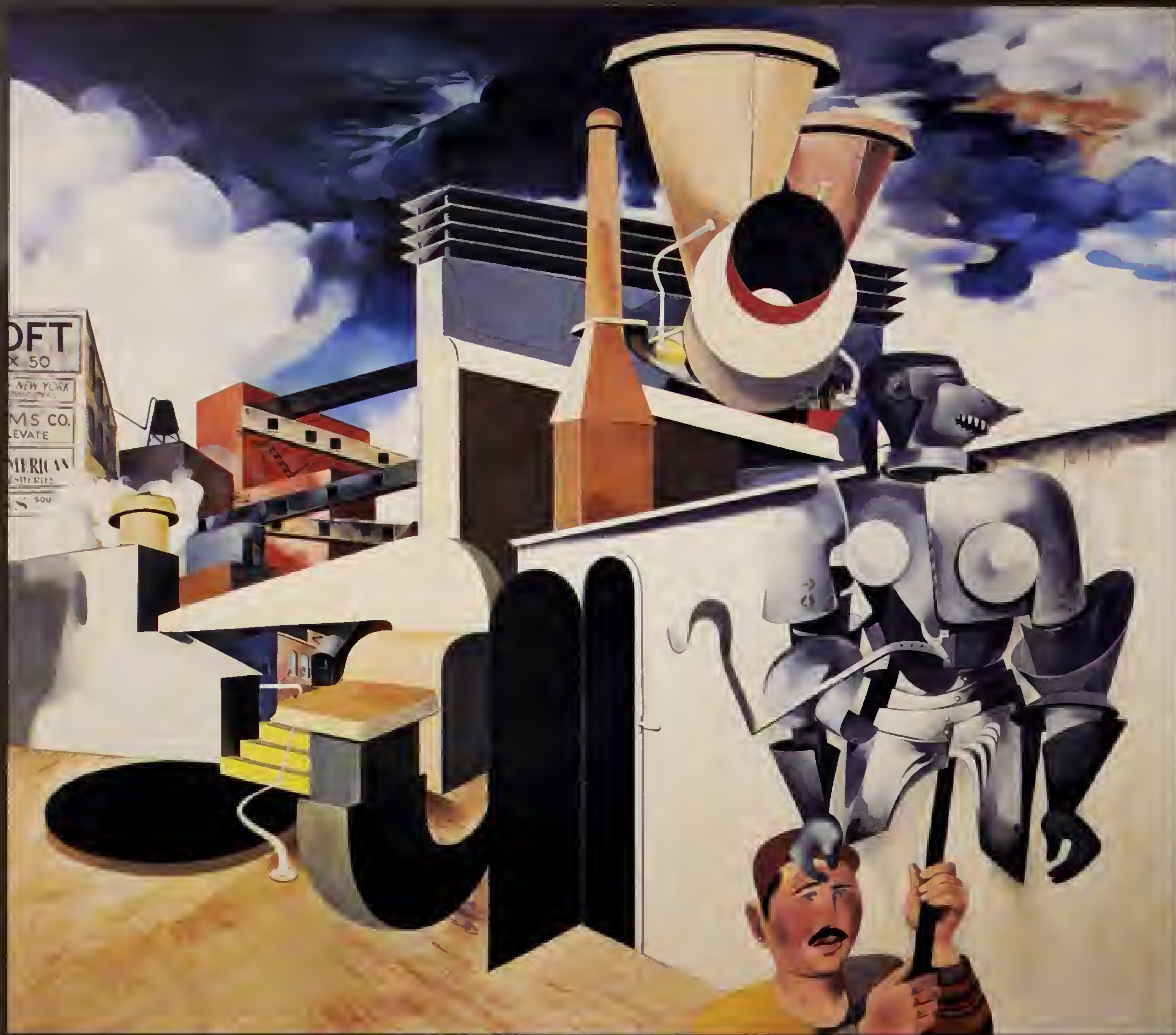
THE SURREAL CITY

1930s–1950s

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

May 3–July 11, 1985



PETER BLUME *Parade*, 1930 Oil on canvas, 49¼ x 56⅜ The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller

Checklist

Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width.

George Ault (1891–1948)

Sculpture on a Roof, 1945
Oil on board, 16 x 12
The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio; Gift of Mrs. George Ault

New York Rooftop, 1940
Oil on canvas, $26\frac{3}{8}$ x $20\frac{1}{4}$
Collection of Raymond J. Learsy

Peter Blume (b. 1906)

Parade, 1930
Oil on canvas, $49\frac{1}{4}$ x $56\frac{3}{8}$
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller

Study for section of *South of Scranton*, 1930
Oil on canvas, 28 x 20
Private collection

Jewett Campbell (b. 1912)

Suicide on Main Street, 1949
Oil on canvas, 40 x 30
Collection of the artist

Francis Criss (1901–1973)

Astor Place, 1932
Oil on canvas, 32 x 40
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 33.9

Why the Line?, 1934
Oil on canvas mounted on masonite, 40 x $23\frac{1}{2}$
ACA Galleries, New York

Philip Evergood (1901–1973)

Lily and the Sparrows, 1939
Oil on composition board, 30 x 24
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 41.42

O. Louis Guglielmi (1906–1956)

Izaak Walton in Brooklyn, 1937
Oil on composition board, $29\frac{3}{4}$ x $23\frac{7}{8}$
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; on extended loan from the United States WPA Art Program

Mental Geography, 1938
Oil on panel, 34 x 26
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Barney A. Ebsworth

Tenements, 1939
Oil on canvas, $35\frac{1}{2}$ x $25\frac{1}{2}$
Georgia Museum of Art, the University of Georgia, Athens; University purchase

James Guy (1910–1983)

Public Education #1, 1936
Oil on canvas, 13 x 20
Collection of Merrill C. Berman

Cinderella, 1937
Oil on canvas, $23\frac{1}{2}$ x $29\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of Merrill C. Berman

Henry Koerner (b. 1915)
Mirror of Life, 1946
Oil on composition board, 36 x 42
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 48.2

The Pigeons, 1949
Oil on canvas, $38\frac{1}{2}$ x 47
Collection of Dr. Bernard H. Grossman and Ruth B. Grossman

Alice Neel (1900–1984)

Synthesis of New York (The Great Depression), 1933
Oil on canvas, 48 x $38\frac{3}{4}$
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Kay Sage (1898–1963)

No Passing, 1954
Oil on canvas, $51\frac{1}{4}$ x 38
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 55.10

George Tooker (b. 1920)

Children and Spastics, 1946
Egg tempera on composition board, $24\frac{1}{2}$ x $18\frac{1}{2}$
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Gift of the Mary and Earle Ludgin Collection

The Bird Watchers, 1948
Egg tempera on composition board, $26\frac{1}{2}$ x $32\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of Olga H. Knoepke

The Subway, 1950
Egg tempera on composition board, 18 x 36
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Juliana Force Purchase 50.23

Highway, 1953
Egg tempera on composition board, $22\frac{7}{8}$ x 18
Terra Museum of American Art, Evanston, Illinois; Daniel J. Terra Collection

The Surreal City: 1930s–1950s

As the Depression grew worse during the 1930s, American artists began to depict the national despair and political ferment which accompanied the country's economic collapse. Regionalist and Social Realist painters portrayed the plight of the American worker in rural and urban settings. The city—no longer a glittering metropolis or lively melting pot—became a study in contrasts, a setting in which the pain of the Depression was accentuated by the empty promise of high living and good times. To a public politicized by the economic crisis, these realistic paintings were dramatic and accurate depictions of life in a suddenly impoverished America.

A number of American artists, however, appropriated the imagery and devices of Surrealism to make socio-political indictments. Surrealism as a movement had surfaced in Europe in the 1920s. Its purpose was to revolutionize both art and politics by encouraging artists, writers, and composers to tap the uncensored creative power of the unconscious. Through the exploration of dream imagery and the use of free association as advanced by Freudian psychology, Surrealist painters sought to create both an art and a society which would break through the constraints of bourgeois culture and taboos. Pure Surrealism was thus polemical and ideologically linked to radical European politics, even though André Breton, one of the movement's most articulate spokesmen, perceived it differently. The goal of Surrealism, he wrote in his 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*, was to "express . . . the actual functioning of thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason. . . ."

The first Surrealist exhibition in America, "Newer Super Realism," was held at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, in 1931. It was organized by Julien Levy, a New York gallery owner and important supporter of Surrealist activities. In 1936, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, mounted an ambitious exhibition, "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism," which received much attention from the press and public. American artists generally rejected or ignored most of the political and social theory on which Surrealism was founded. But the movement provided Americans with a more personally based aesthetic philosophy for depicting the jarring experience of living in a society that appeared increasingly discordant.

The American city, with its visually rich textures and diverse population, proved fertile ground for the fusion of fantastic imagery and social commentary. Artists such as O. Louis Guglielmi, Peter Blume, and James Guy could confront the urban scene with a new visual vocabulary—one that heightened emotional impact by incorporating the spontaneous interplay of the "real" world with the unconscious one. Although these painters usually disliked being categorized, two distinct (and often overlapping) concepts emerged from their work: "Magic Realism," which emphasizes the enigmatic character and mystery of the mundane; and "Social Surrealism," which addresses social issues.

Perhaps the most ardent exponent of urban Social Surrealism was O. Louis Guglielmi. Raised in a New York City tenement, Guglielmi took up the social and political concerns of the poor. Although many of his city scenes recall the haunting arched streets of the Italian Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico, their message is less ethereal, rooted in the reality of war, poverty, or injustice. *Tenements* (1939), Guglielmi's most controversial painting, depicts a block of tenement buildings, the tallest of which is topped by a large memorial wreath. Coffins—their shape an obvious echo of the buildings—line the street. The work was purchased by the U.S. State Department and included in the 1946 exhibition "Advancing American Art" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. But the government feared that *Tenements* would be perceived as a left-wing criticism of American life and removed it before a scheduled tour of Europe and Central America. Later, the Secretary of State brought the entire tour to a halt and recalled all the exhibited works.

Guglielmi's *Mental Geography* (1938) indicts war and fascism with the same intensity that *Tenements* attacked poverty. Inspired by the Spanish Civil War, the painting warns of the fascist threat to political freedom, even in America.

Man's emotional isolation in an urban-industrial society was another popular theme for a number of artists in this period. Peter Blume, Philip Evergood and, later, George Tooker all addressed what Guglielmi referred to as "the darkness of industrial enslavement." In his *Izaak Walton in Brooklyn* (1937), the image of Walton (whose seventeenth-century guide, *The Compleat Angler*,

celebrated rural life) fishes in a stream rising from the brick sidewalk. The contrast between the suggestion of a pastoral country stream and the bleak, deserted city streets is expressed in the fisherman's dreamy pose against Brooklyn's stark factories and tenements.

In *Parade* (1930), Peter Blume depicts a similarly industrial scene—the New York waterfront. The billboard in the background and the air ventilator in the upper foreground were popular icons for other artists, but Blume's surreal visual associations create an enigmatic statement about man's relationship to technology. In the foreground, a male figure (the critic Malcolm Cowley) holds aloft a Renaissance suit of armor, as he heads an unpeopled parade of heavy industry. Blume explained in an interview that the armor was a "machine" that represented an earlier phase of technology and thus anticipated the waterfront's massive steel and concrete structures.

Like Peter Blume, Alice Neel was never considered a Social Surrealist. Yet the devastation of the Depression greatly affected her urban paintings during the 1930s. In *Synthesis of New York (The Great Depression)* (1933), painted while Neel was employed in the Public Works of Art Project, she combines fantastic imagery with Ashcan realism. The painting is divided into three levels: the lowest represents a deserted subway; the street level is inhabited by skull-headed people in an environment of factories; and the sky contains angelic dress forms, hovering around the sun. The skeletal figures trudging toward the "El" are symbolically depicted as dead souls in a bleak city.

By the mid-1940s, when George Tooker's professional career began, the poverty of the Depression years was no longer a burning issue. Yet human isolation and conformity in an increasingly technological society remained major social concerns, and they became focal points of Tooker's work. While a student at Harvard during the 1930s, he was active in radical politics. But the doctrinaire approach of the Communist literature he distributed eventually "bored" him and, inspired by Mexican artists such as David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, he turned to painting as a vehicle for social change. Tooker, in Thomas Garver's analysis, "treats the individual condition in an urban way, by compounding the individual sense of fright, terror, or even dull disquiet and resignation, and making it a social, almost universal fate." Thus the American city became the setting for what Tooker called his "public paintings"—those that focus on social issues and are also in public collections. *The Subway* (1950), the most well known of these works, is set in a New York subway station. The same figures occur again and again, in a nightmarish repetitive progression that has since become a trademark of Tooker's oeuvre.

> I was thinking of a large modern city as a kind of limbo. The subway seemed a good place to represent a denial of the senses and a negation of life itself. Its being underground with great weight overhead was important. I thought of the labyrinth of the Minotaur and the unreal perspectives of a Hall of Mirrors.

In *Highway* (1953), painted three years later, repeated forms create a dizzying composition of arrows, cars, striped barriers, stop signals, and highway lights. Drivers with blackened eyes glare through the windshields of their vicious-looking cars, as they are halted by a figure clad entirely in black. There is no movement—cars, drivers, and uniformed figure remain at a standstill; life itself grinds to a halt.

As America moved from the Depression to postwar prosperity, social themes gradually receded in favor of more aesthetically oriented concerns. By the 1950s, the image of the city became less effective as an emblem of industry and alienation. It was initially replaced by imagery of suburban life. More recently, the Industrial Parks of Silicon Valley on the American West Coast have come to symbolize man's diminished role in space-age technology. It remains to be seen whether these postindustrial centers will emerge as settings for contemporary art and provide a subject as thematically rich as the urban landscape used by the artists assembled in this exhibition.

SUSAN LUBOWSKY

The works in this exhibition were selected by Susan Lubowsky, Branch Director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris. Special thanks are extended to Jeffrey Wechsler, Assistant Director, Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Patterson Sims, Associate Curator, Permanent Collection, Whitney Museum of American Art, for their valuable advice and to intern Elizabeth Marcus, who helped with the research for this publication.

Funding for the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris is provided by Philip Morris Incorporated.

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris
120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017

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Design
Elizabeth Finger

Typesetting
Haber Typographers, Inc.

Printing
Eastern Press, Inc.

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