

Richard Lindner 1901-1978

In an interview two days before his death, Lindner talked about Weimar Germany, his past and the women who had haunted him. The works in his recent New York show—the first in ten years—are a disturbing and unique testament to his vision

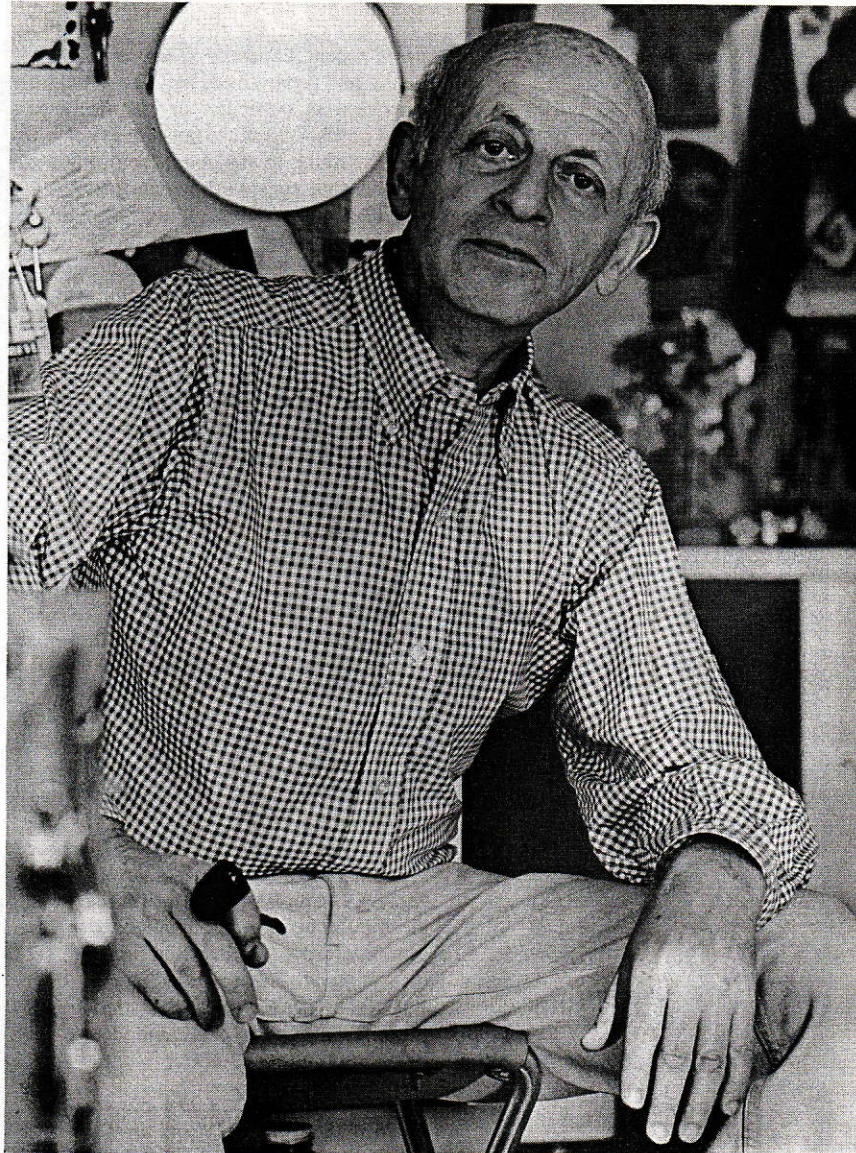
by JOHN GRUEN

Richard Lindner was an artist of extraordinary gentleness whose work dealt almost exclusively in cruelty.

His imagery fixed on the bizarre low-life of his native Germany transmuted into sinister American nightmares drenched in garish

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New York colors. With stiletto precision he shaped male and female figures of supreme hostility whose encounters produced a ferocious sexuality. No other 20th-century painter has depicted women with greater fanaticism or greater eroticism. A savage lust informs their monumental geography and the promise of their embrace implies instant annihilation.



HANS NAMUTH

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And yet Lindner saw these rapacious creatures as mythic goddesses—sacred beings consumed by secret desires. Dressed in outrageous garb or seen in terrifying nakedness, they emerge as fantasy figures of unthinkable potency. Their icy grandeur creates a devouring heat, and the men seen within this ambiguous climate seem themselves enthralled by the voyeuristic dramas which Lindner invented with such cool.

During the mid-'60s Lindner's paintings were mistakenly swept into the vortex of Pop art. It was assumed that the stark immediacy of his mundane subject matter—pimps, whores, killers, cruel dogs and mad parrots painted in slick and glistening colors—was the product of contemporary experience and the celebration of seamy American life. In point of fact, Lindner predated Pop by nearly 20 years, during which time the artist was considered something of an outsider—someone whose stylistic roots seemed firmly planted in constructivist soil. Indeed, the immaculate geometry of his figures can easily be translated and isolated into abstract structural shapes—circles, squares, triangles, which in turn re-emerge as the components of figurative elements—breasts, eyes, shoulders, legs.

Again, the sensibility that informs his subject matter is not an American Pop sensibility (although America was Lindner's pictorial hunting ground), but one that had long been immersed in European culture and derived its impetus from old-world bourgeois life and standards. Still, the razor-sharp quality of his technique, the almost abrasive glare of his light, and the startling nature of his pictorial content ultimately brought Lindner's pictures within the ambience of Pop art and, much to his surprise, the movement helped to catapult his name into the forefront of American art.

Two days before the artist's death on April 16, 1978, at the age of 76, Richard Lindner agreed to an interview. His first major exhibition in New York in ten years had just opened at the Sidney Janis Gallery, and Lindner had traveled from his home in Paris to be present at the opening. The exhibition found the artist in dazzling form, with canvas after canvas producing their familiar *frisson* of malevolence. Lindner's creative vigor had not diminished—indeed, had intensified and coalesced into an ever terser and more eloquent statement of pure form and gorgeously poisonous color. And the atmosphere of threat and apprehension that inhabited each work continued to wield its disquieting power.

Lindner looked very frail at his opening. A short, small-boned man with sad, questioning, pale blue eyes, he had complained of being unable to shake a recent bout of the Russian flu—a bout that caused him to lose some 15 pounds. Still, he seemed delighted to see the many friends and visitors who had come to greet him and to celebrate his opening. With him was his wife, Denise, an extremely pretty French woman 40 years Lindner's junior. During the opening, a date was set for an interview. "We'll have an

elegant lunch, and then we'll go back to my apartment and talk," Lindner told me.

The lunch a few days later was indeed elegant and the artist seemed in fine spirits. I learned that his wife had returned to Paris. "She loves New York, but likes Paris better," said Lindner. "Denise is a very good artist, but for some reason she refuses to show her paintings. It's really very strange."

During lunch Lindner explained that although he had been living in Paris for many years, he had always kept an apartment in New York.

"Paris is so boring! I need to recharge myself by coming back here all the time. Actually, all the sketches for my paintings are made in New York. Just to see the color of a New York truck or taxi excites me! There's life in New York. Paris is dead. All the ideas for my paintings come from what I see here. Then I go back to Paris and paint the pictures. I've not shown in New York for ten years because there have been several retrospectives of my work in Europe. Also, I wanted to remove myself from the

New York art scene. My last show here was with the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery . . . finally, it didn't work out and I left them. I don't know . . . I suppose my feelings about New York are unjust. I mean, I've never had a bad review, but somehow I've never really had any real recognition in America. Critics and museum people just never knew what to do with me or where to place me. In Europe my work hangs in the best museums, and things are not so confusing. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't like to be a young painter living in New York today. I wouldn't know how to begin here!"

Lunch over, we strolled a few blocks to Lindner's apartment in the East 70s. Comfortable and immaculate, the modern living room had been turned into a studio. A specially constructed easel, with small pulleys and cranks, stood near the windows. A charcoal sketch of a man with a bowler hat rested upon it. We sat on a wide, low leather couch and Lindner began to recount something of his past.

"Although I was born in Hamburg, my first youth was spent in Nuremberg, the

most medieval and the most cruel city in the world. The worst instruments of torture were invented there, like the Iron Maiden. People were thrown into wells. Of course, Hitler made Nuremberg his headquarters. But it was a beautiful city. It was a city of canals—like Venice. It had rich merchants and it has a great history of art. But even as a boy I was aware of a great coldness there . . . something sinister that came out of every crevice of the city.

"My mother was an American. When she was 20 she came to Germany, met my father and married him. They settled in Hamburg. My mother has been dead for many years, but I'm still trying to discover her riddle. Her obsession was to become as European as possible. But she failed. As a child I found her behavior almost grotesque. What I mean is she could never quite reconcile her enormous desire for being a true European mother with her strong puritanical temperament. The harder she tried, the more bizarre it became. And I became more and more confused as to what she expected of me.

"In a way, she reminds me a little of George Grosz. When Grosz came to America, he wanted to be more American than the Americans. He even wanted to paint like Norman Rockwell! He brought with him an idea of what an American was like. Again, it was a grotesque idea and Grosz failed—just as my mother failed. While Grosz hated the German people he drew and painted, I'm convinced that he was a little like them. You see, one cannot escape what one is."

As a young man, Lindner trained for a career as a concert pianist. During his early 20s he began to concertize and was hailed as a highly promising talent. Becoming a painter had never once entered his mind.

At the age of 24, Lindner moved to Munich. There he met a former school mate who was studying painting at the Munich Academy.

"This friend asked me to visit him at the academy, and when I entered that beautiful old building I was transported. I walked through many hallways and galleries, and when I reached his studio I saw two or three artists sitting there painting and smoking and talking. In the center of the room stood a fat naked woman who was posing. The atmosphere was so congenial . . . it was like a dream world! Then and there I resolved to stop being a pianist. The fact is, I couldn't stand the pressures of concertizing. I suppose if I had been a real musician I would never have stopped. But I gave up music and applied for entrance at the academy. I was accepted and stayed there for three years. I became a master student. I learned all the basics and my first works were very academic still lifes. I learned how to draw extremely well from very bad painters. I soon found out that from a good painter you never learn anything. Picasso and Matisse were terrible teachers. The only thing a good painter can do is stimulate you.

"Anyway, after my academy training I



Richard Lindner, *La chasse*, 1976, oil on canvas. "I'm not in the least attracted to the kind of women I paint." Photo courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery.

went to live in Berlin. I lived there for two years—1927 and 1928. Well, Berlin was a fantastic city. I mean, it was criminal! It was rotten with talent! *Everything* was going on. It was as George Grosz had depicted it, full of decadence and meanness. It was lurid and perverted and marvelous. And so was Paris, when I finally got there. Paris was also rotten, but with big, big talent everywhere.

"I was already married when I got to Berlin. My first wife was a fellow art student at the Munich Academy. We lived together for a few years, and then she fell desperately in love with a writer—a close friend of mine. She didn't exactly leave me, but she lived with the writer. It was an understood relationship—but it took a bad turn. The writer became very ill and died. When that happened, my wife committed suicide."

In 1929 Lindner returned to Munich and took a job as an art director of a well-known publishing firm. When the Nazis rose to power, Lindner escaped to Paris and by 1933 had become politically active while also continuing to paint. In 1939 the French government interned Lindner for political reasons, but he was released a few months later. At the start of World War II, the artist joined the French army and later the British army. In 1941 he emigrated to the United States and settled in New York. To support himself, he found work as an illustrator for such magazines as *Vogue*, *Town & Country*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Fortune*.

"There wasn't much of an art world in New York when I came here," said Lindner. "There were two or three galleries, and nobody sold anything. I met all the New York artists, but I was always an outsider. I didn't fit in. You see, I wasn't part of any movement. I made a good living as an illustrator, but I got very tired of it. Actually I didn't begin to be a full-time painter until 1950—there was always something interfering. But then, in 1950, I started to make time for myself. By 1952, I decided to take a teaching job. I taught at Pratt Institute for 12 years. Later I taught at Yale, but that was only for a short time. Actually I didn't like teaching. I taught because I wanted time to paint."

Speaking very softly and with a slight German accent, Lindner discursively began to touch on what lay behind his paintings—the strange scenarios which, he claimed, came straight out of his imagination.

"Subject matter for me is always a man, a woman, a child and a dog. Dogs, like children, are the real grown-ups. And dogs and their owners have always amused me. The other day I was in an elevator and there was an old lady holding a poodle. She said to it, 'Say hello to the nice gentleman!' Germans love German shepherds because they can command them—Germans love to command. Anyway, I never use a model. Models disturb me. They want to talk, and I don't like that. I never do color sketches. I do color on the canvas. About color: I have

always felt that in order to be a good painter one should be color-blind, because color doesn't have to be seen. It needs only to be felt. When I told that to some of my students, they thought I was crazy!

"Anyway, my paintings have a lot to do with balance and composition. I like structure. As for the women in my paintings, you have only to look at my wife to know that the women I paint are not at all my type. Sometimes the women are very big for reasons of pictorial balance. But, of course, those women have haunted me. Still, I have never really been hurt by a woman. All my women have stayed friends. No. I'm not in the least attracted to the kind of women I paint. However, I think that one must deal with one's complexes. . . .

"Of course, there is the bordello aspect to my women, and the criminal aspect. Of course, we are all criminals—it's all a matter of degree. Crime is as human as being charitable. Naturally we must have tribal laws. But crime . . . crime is like art, and the artist has always understood the criminal. The fear of the criminal is the same as the fear of the artist: both are terrified of exposure. It's basic to their nature.

"But women . . . ! When I paint them, it's an expression of pure love. I could put this love into any medium. I could put it into sounds. I could put it into words. Actually, I was talking about this to Bill de Kooning. Bill and I are always being accused of being women-haters. The fact is, we love women.

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m looking forward to the day when a woman is president. It's the most logical role for her. With a woman as head of state, there would be no wars. Take her vanity—it all goes into the mirror; it would never affect her role as leader. Man's vanity goads him into all sorts of destructive activity. Luckily women are changing all that.

"Already I sense how men are having a harder and harder time proving their manhood. Women have found out their secret. And men are losing their feathers by the minute. Man's secret is that his so-called manhood is a myth. It's a 19th-century concept that's been fed and nurtured and swallowed by generations of women who, in the meantime, have had all the time and years to strengthen and deepen their own mystery and power.

"Today women look at men as mystic strangers. Not at all, mind you, as weaklings or creatures devoid of character or substance, but as strangers—mystic beings without any real secrets. Man's touted enjoyment of sex, for example. It no longer worries women. They're enjoying it just as much as, if not more than, men. And they enjoy it openly and fearlessly. Man's ego is being changed by all this, and it's beginning to worry him. Women have a greater sense of fantasy. At the same time, they are far more realistic than men.

"And they are wonderfully in command of themselves! Have you ever watched a woman bathe? They do it ever so slowly, almost in slow motion. They observe themselves as though they were works of art. They linger and pause, and they move as in a trance. Beautiful! Beautiful and endlessly fascinating!"

Lindner paused, closed his eyes and savored the thought. In a moment he opened his eyes, smiled and added, "Of course, they *are* terrifying! But, you know, my work is really a reflection of Germany of the '20s. It was the only time the Germans were any good. On the other hand, my creative nourishment comes from New York, and from pictures I see in American magazines or on television. America is really a fantastic place! That's why I admire Andy Warhol so much. He's not a great painter but he's an extraordinary stimulator. He really opened America's eyes to the beauty of the utilitarian, everyday object—to the importance of the can!

"I admire the Pop artists—Warhol and Lichtenstein and Oldenburg—but I'm not one of them—never was. My real influences have been Giotto and Piero della Francesca, timeless and ageless artists. I look at them all the time! And I hope that something of their strength has come into my pictures. Basically it's what I'm aiming for—that kind of structural solidity . . . that kind of power!"

The interview had come to a close. Two days later, Richard Lindner died in his sleep. The works he created will remain a disturbing and unique testament of an artist's superb craftsmanship, originality and vision. ■

MICHEL PELLUS



"Demi-Mesure"

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