JUDITH DOLNICK / ROBERT NATKIN

June 2 - July 31, 1987

THE FINE ARTS CENTER ART GALLERY
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

OPENING RECEPTION: Friday, June 12, 1987, 5 - 7 PM

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Most of all, I wish to thank Judith Dolnick and Robert Natkin for sharing their work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Director

Front Cover: (top) JUDITH DOLNICK, *Untitled*, 1986
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96"

(bottom) ROBERT NATKIN, *Night Fall*, 1987
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 119"

Photographs: Courtesy Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer Ltd.

Judith Dolnick and Robert Natkin

Judith Dolnick and Robert Natkin have shared an aesthetic and conjugal life for over thirty years and have enlarged it and deepened it in that time with their art, their children, their friends, their home, its surroundings, and its contents. And although each of these elements has its own individual existence, they are not discrete parts of the lives of these two artists. Rather, it is the weaving together of all these elements that makes their art both unique and symbiotic, and understanding the process by which this occurs reveals the source and character of their art.

To understand the interrelation of these parts and the art that is formed by it is to see how reasonable it follows that in this marriage of artists it cannot be allowed for one partner to be accorded preferences over another. Thus, in the initial discussions of this joint exhibition, when it was assumed that the husband's paintings would be placed in the very large room of the gallery and the wife's in the more intimate, Natkin was disturbed by the contemplation of this assumption. However, there was logic behind the assumption since he does very large paintings and had even considered doing one especially for the exhibit. But overriding the logic was Natkin's thought of conceding to the stereotype of the male automatically meriting or requiring the larger recognition or share of anything. Such stereotypes threaten the climate in which his and Dolnick's art is created and breathes: that is, the climate of the shared aesthetic life where the idea of "the artist's wife who also happens to paint" is anathema. It is a climate where the strong sense of community insists that the proper interaction of the character of the art and the space - whether the art is by husband, wife, friend, or a nineteenth century master - is the main determining factor as to where it is hung. It is a climate where the physical size or public recognition of the artist's work counts for less than the dynamics of the work itself so that a small piece that has the power to command a large space may have its due. And it is a climate in which it is felt that the idea, as well as the look, of the companionship of many different works multiplies the pleasure of any single work by itself.

These are assumptions shared by Dolnick and Natkin, and perhaps it is the strength of these assumptions that account for Dolnick's lesser sensitivity to the much publicized hardships of her gender. That does not discount her awareness of the potential damage of sexual stereotypes or the subtle ways conventional expectations in the upbringing of children play in setting those stereotypes. She acknowledges that being brought up as a girl in a middle class environment may account for an unconscious notion that does not allow her to see it as important for a woman to establish herself as an artist as it is for a man, or for a feeling that she is not deserving of certain things, or that it is inappropriate to assert herself in certain ways. But she decidedly does not escalate those personal issues into a position in the feminist politics of the art world. Always, the larger forces at work in her formation as an artist are the world she chooses to live in and the world she creates for herself. Obviously, she notes, there are female artists who are showing their work and doing very well.

Dolnick and Natkin were both born in Chicago coming from two very different family backgrounds. Her father was a labor arbitrator, but, whatever associations one has about the fair-minded inclinations of someone in that calling, the reality of their application at home was different. Rising from the working class through the prowess of his intellect and the force of his personality, and achieving status, authority, and material comfort, and ultimately moving to the northern suburbs, his feelings and ideals about success were narrowly focused. He articulated the program in the family and expected no dissent. That program included the idea that one's highest aspirations should lie in the professional world for men, as professionals, preferably with a Ph.D.; for women, to be married to one, although they could be teachers

before raising a family. Artists definitely were not professionals and there was no value in being married to one. Yet, as far as the impact of upbringing leaves its impression, ideas such as these also inspire rebellion in people of strong character and, in this environment of intellectual and material aspiration, Dolnick also learned to guard her independence and defend against rigidity and control whether they originated in the expectations of her family or her suburban environment. Thus, she went off to college in California, became an artist, and married one.

Natkin's family was entirely different. His father was nonchalant about family order and unreliable as well. His ambition to make his living as a tap dancer was never achieved, although he stayed attached to the world of show business to the compromise of his role as a provider. Natkin's mother compounded the self-indulgence. Natkin has spoken of the carelessness of his upbringing against which the occasional excitements of the great Chicago theaters to which his father took him, and his discovery of serious art in prints and books, were set in high relief. Like Dolnick, he seems to have had both positive and negative responses to his background, in his identification with performing artists and their conviction that they could earn a living in a financially precarious profession and, on the other hand, in his determination to find a stable, coherent, directed homelife enriched with aesthetic and intellectual pleasures.

In hindsight, the attraction between Dolnick and Natkin was inevitable: she inclined to someone who would respect her independence and not suffocate her artistic growth; he to someone offering stability and commitment. He asserts that he divined her character before he met her from one of her prints shown to him by one of Dolnick's friends. Its subject was a woman in a chair with lots of flowers surrounding her. He perceived a gentleness in it and also strength and knew he wanted to meet the artist. Indeed, that combination of strength and gentleness turned out to be a source of sustenance to Natkin. He says, with regard to his art, that he is especially grateful to her for being his toughest but most reasonable critic. Their courtship lasted a mere two months, and their marriage immediately laid the cornerstones of their living style that has been built on and expanded consistently over the past thirty years.

Characteristically, their first apartment, on Wells Street in the Near North Side of Chicago, was behind a storefront which they converted into an art gallery. Opened in 1957, and simply called the Wells Street Gallery, they mainly showed their work with other artists of their generation working in Chicago at the time, including Richard Bogart, Ernest Dieringer, Ann Mattingly, Ron Slowinski, Donald Vlack, and Jerry van de Wiele. The expenses of these exhibits were minimal - about thirteen dollars to cover the costs of printing the announcement and four dollars for utilities and other miscellaneous expenses. More established artists such as the nationally-known Chicago photographer Aaron Siskind were also shown, as were such New York Abstract Expressionists as DeKooning, Guston, Kline, and Pollock, with works borrowed from local collections. Also on the schedule was the first one-man exhibition of a young Chicago sculptor, John Chamberlain, who Natkin had known when they lived in the same condemned warehouse before Chamberlain moved to New York. However, no art was sold.

There was not much of a gallery-going public for vanguard art in the late 1950's, and even the established artists were not known by too many people outside the relatively small art circles concerned with post-war American art, even if the newspapers were generous in writing up the exhibitions. Natkin and Dolnick and their contemporaries talked about the situation and, committed as they were to live by their art and not by jobs taken on the side, all of them decided to move to New York, where they believed they would receive a more appropriate response to their efforts.

Dolnick felt no regrets about leaving Chicago and does not feel that any memory of the city leaves an impact on her work. Natkin has no regrets either, but he does harbor a certain nostalgia about it, and the imagery of some of his canvases is associated with boyhood experiences. His *Apollo* series, for example, the name of which evokes aspects of Chicago theaters he attended, is also inspired by them, and the great pleasure he took from the rich architectural heritage of the city is recalled in other paintings in reference to Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. Both Dolnick and Natkin share an indebtedness to the fine collection of late nineteenth and early twentieth century masters that they visited frequently at the Art Institute of Chicago. They often return to those artists - Monet, Degas, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Seurat, Gauguin, Bonnard, Matisse - to pay homage, not merely by naming them but in the adaption of their colorful, sensuous qualities to their own work.

New York, where they arrived in 1959, allowed for more opportunities for showing work and for meeting people who were willing to come to see it and even purchase it. Moreover, those opportunities would expand, sometimes with disadvantage as standards were bound to become looser, as the Sixties was also the decade that would mark the rise of the visual arts in America to an unprecedented popularity. This writer recalls the excitement of the period and his first meeting with the artists in 1960, shortly after their arrival and the birth of their first child. I worked in an art gallery then and spent many days and evenings scouting for new artists. It seemed as if there was an endless flow of artists into the city from the hinterlands, and rentals were still cheap enough that everybody could be accommodated. Natkin and Dolnick lived in a good-sized loft on West 18th Street and as spare as it was, I remember walking in on a distinctly domestic environment - the smell of food being prepared, the sound of a baby crying, the warmth in being received - and one that was enlivened with their art and collected objects. It is a sensation still felt in their home today - although the children are grown - and it affirms the integrity of their art with their lives.

Natkin recalls a contrary and skeptical reaction to this environment, when the "beat" poet Gregory Corso happened to visit. At that time, their friend Ron Slowinski, who had also recently emigrated from Chicago, was living with them following a fire in his loft. Since Slowinski is a devout Catholic, Natkin had built a little altar for him. Corso noticed this and commented something to the effect that "Artists don't have religious altars and artists don't have rugs on the floors of their lofts." Despite the new opportunities, living in New York did not guarantee against stereotypes alien to the choice of some artists' living style, and the more the artist was received by the public, the more inflated or distorted those prejudices were liable to become.

Nevertheless, Natkin soon found a good gallery. His first New York exhibition was at the Poindexter Gallery in 1959, and it was now possible to earn his living from his art. Eventually, Natkin and Dolnick moved to the Upper West Side of Manhattan and, like true New Yorkers, began exploring ways of taking respite from the city. Natkin was soon eager to make his residence outside the city and exile himself from those aspects of the New York art world he found repellent. It is no secret that it can be superficial, clannish, and cynical. Dolnick knew this too, but she objected to moving since that would contradict the reasons they came to New York in the first place; besides, she liked life in New York and preferred it to suburban living. Natkin countered that they would live in the country, not the suburbs. His persistence won out when, in 1970, they bought the little house in rural Connecticut in which they still live today. Over the years the house has expanded and it almost seems as if it has grown for the purpose of accommodating more and more art, antiques, and friends. Some of the friends go back to the early days in Chicago, and some, like Mike Dillon and Craig O'Brien, are of a younger generation, but all are attuned to the premises - to the beauty of the environment and the ideas it represents.

What one sees there are not only dozens of paintings, sculptures, and graphics by Dolnick and Natkin and those of their friends and others they have collected, but also early American folk furniture, Victorian majolica, American Indian pottery and artifacts, Oriental rugs and ceramics, antique glass, books, cassettes of classic movies, flowers, and countless mementoes and memorabilia. And surrounding all this are views of the lush Connecticut countryside. The first impression of this environment, before one separates out the individual objects, is of color - not riotous color, but a tantalizing range between subtle and exhilarating. Next, as one starts to feast on the color, the variety of objects comes into focus, their shapes counterpointing the color. From the time one enters and as one moves through the house, surprise after surprise overtakes the visitor as each room unfolds its particular treasures. The procedure then gives rise to a kind of suspense as one's expectations are whetted to see more, and as one pleasure succeeds another, each satisfaction prepares one to see still more. It is a little like the feeling Dorothy must have had on her visit to the Emerald City. But what one sees here is not fantasy. It is the art and craft of men and women who took pleasure in making their objects and wished to convey that pleasure to those who would look at or use them.

While all of this physicality is representative of their lives - their associations, their proclivities, their thinking - it is also presented with its human counterpart: by the simple graciousness with which a visitor is received and by the offering of good and plentiful food and drink and the easy and open conversation that follows. It not only makes one feel good, it brings out one's best instincts and allows one to think more freely, to take risks. Thus it is not simply an environment of comfort and pleasure but one that encourages adventure and probing as well.

Dolnick and Natkin always preferred this kind of enhanced domestic environment to that of the artists' cafe, or, in its American form, the Cedar Bars, with their risks having to do more with how well one can negotiate the intrigues of art world politics. They have chosen to create an alternative world with a sympathetic family where trust and sharing predominate. Quite opposite to the inscription at the gateway to the Inferno, theirs might read: *Abandon cynicism for pleasure and renewal all ye who enter.*

That viewpoint, oddly enough, often meets with opprobrium in the production of much of contemporary art which makes a point of denigrating those values. Often the idea of art giving pleasure and getting the viewer involved in the creative process through pleasure is ignored in favor of getting the viewer entangled in a test of knowledge about the contemporary art scene; for example, to discover who or what has been "appropriated" and how the object reflects on its source. And there are a host of other puzzles dealing with deciphering the dialogue of trends promoted in the galleries and played up in the museums and the press. Dolnick and Natkin reject this reliance on an attenuated intellectual dialogue for their art. They insist that their art is primarily intuitive, and that its intellectual content derives from the knowledge and understanding of all the painting, design, and craft they ever liked, out of the emotional rapport and exchange of ideas between them and their friends, and out of the integration of their lives within a cooperative and fertile atmosphere where, rather than meeting a dead end, art has a future.

Bruce Glaser
Fairfield, Connecticut
April, 1987

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art gallery

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PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE ART GALLERY

1975 FACULTY EXHIBITION
1976 MICHELLE STUART
RECENT DRAWINGS (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
SALVATORE ROMANO
1977 MEL PEKARSKY
JUDITH BERNSTEIN
HERBERT BAYER (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
1978 LEON GOLUB
WOMEN ARTISTS FROM NEW YORK
JANET FISH
ROSEMARY MAYER
THE SISTER CHAPEL
1979 SHIRLEY GORELICK
ALAN SONFIST
HOWARDENA PINDELL
ROY LICHTENSTEIN
1980 BENNY ANDREWS
ALEX KATZ
EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
OTTO PIENE
STONY BROOK 11, THE STUDIO FACULTY
1981 ALICE NEEL
55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
JOHN LITTLE
IRA JOEL HABER
LEON POLK SMITH
1982 FOUR SCULPTORS
CECILE ABISH
JACK YOUNGERMAN
ALAN SHIELDS
THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL
ANN McCOY
1983 THE WAR SHOW
CERAMIC DIRECTIONS: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW
CINDY SHERMAN
THE FACULTY SHOW
1984 BERNARD APTEKAR: ART AND POLITICS
ERIC STALLER: LIGHT YEARS
NORMAN BLUHM: SEVEN FROM THE SEVENTIES
EDWARD COUNTEY 1921-1984
CARL ANDRE: SCULPTURE
1985 LEWIS HINE IN EUROPE: 1918-1919
FRANCESC TORRES: PATHS OF GLORY
HOMAGE TO BOLOTOWSKY: 1935-1981
FREEDOM WITHIN: PAINTINGS BY JUAN SANCHEZ/ INSTALLATION BY ALFREDO JAAR
ABSTRACT PAINTING REDEFINED
1986 KLEEGE: METAL SCULPTURE
TOBY BUONAGURIO: SELECTED WORKS
YANG YEN-PING AND ZENG SHAN-QING
EIGHT URBAN PAINTERS: CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS OF THE EAST VILLAGE
TV: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT
1987 HANS BREDER: ARCHETYPAL DIAGRAMS
MICHAEL SINGER: RITUAL SERIES RETELLINGS

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