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Robert Berlind

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Deceptive Simplicity, Regal Elegance: Robert Berlind, 1938 to 2015

by Rebecca Allan



Robert Berlind photographed by Jill Krementz on Jan. 14, 2013 in New Haven (Alex Katz's exhibition at Yale School of Art's 32 Edgewood Gallery) © Jill Krementz, all rights reserved

At the recent memorial service for Robert Berlind, who died December 17th after a long illness, friends and family members spoke movingly of Robert's profound generosity of spirit, his equanimity, and his unflagging determination to experience life's gifts even in his last weeks.

Over a fifty-year career Berlind produced an expansive and refined body of work that was rooted in landscape, reflecting a scholar's knowledge of the history of art, and a contemporary artist's relentless effort to understand how we perceive and integrate the visible and interior worlds. This effort was almost entirely camouflaged by the deceptive simplicity of his work, and yet it could be sensed in the considered organization of forms, and in the tensions he created across the surfaces and within the layers of his paintings.

The movement of Berlind's vision reminded me of the gestures of a Tai Chi practitioner, gradually encompassing all dimensions of space (and time). We sense the scanning and tracking motion of his eyes as he sought and isolated particular fragments of the landscape. The artist Mary Lucier, Berlind's wife of 22 years, beautifully captured his tight concentration in her video *Summer, or Grief* (1998), as his head moves quickly back and forth between the motif and the canvas he is painting. This working method resulted in a way of saying – through his paintings – *Here, look at this. Pay attention—this snow shadow, this shivering reflection is really magnificent.*

Berlind's particular contribution came through the manner in which he superimposed layers of space and distance, foreground and background, as though the substances within each spatial level were compressed under a microscope's cover slide, or seen through sheets of Mylar, one above the other. This layering and flattening of the levels of space contributed to a straightforward coolness and precision in his work can bring to mind Winslow Homer's ravens waiting to attack a fox in the snow, or his hunted ducks careening above waves in mid-air. For me, Berlind's approach to pictorial depth also metaphorically suggested that all things are (ideally) created equal, and that the hierarchies we impose on life are essentially artificial and divisive. His ingenuity also came through in his articulation of the edges of things, either softened by movement or distance, or crisply delineated—as in the branches of *Studio Roof #4*, 2015, a painting to be shown in his scheduled solo exhibition next month at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., his New York gallery. In the monumental (5 x



17 foot) *Passage* (2007), Berling created a shimmering grid of interwoven branches and fluttering leaves that alternate between blurred and crisp focus, not unlike the dizzying sensation of watching a filmmaker pulling focus. Berling's mastery of subtle color reflected his affinity with such peers and mentors as Harriet Shorr and Robert Kushner, Alex Katz and Lois Dodd, but his greens were the envy of many painters, as he captured the symphonic range of hues reflected in stream beds, rice seedlings, and winter branches according to their position in the light, the time of day, or the season.

Robert Berling, *Nanzen-ji Sanmon #4*, 2013, oil on board, 20 x 32"

In addition to his work as a distinguished professor, and writer of art criticism, Berling was also a supportive colleague in quieter and less visible ways. One day in 2005 while crossing

Fifth Avenue I bumped into Bob as we were both heading up to see his exhibition at Tibor de Nagy. With his flashing blue eyes, laugh lines, and regal elegance Bob always resembled an 18th-century portrait of Voltaire. Immediately launching into animated conversation about studio problems, we became so engrossed that we almost got run over by a taxi.

Remarkably, Bob made a recording of his thoughts on dying and expressions of gratitude to be played at his memorial service, a gesture that conveyed the tremendous grace and awareness possible within loss. He will be remembered as an artist who was always interested in locating what was most alive in others' work, and who scrutinized the world with searching curiosity, devotion, and love.

***Robert Berling: Kyoto/Cochecton* opens Saturday, January 9, 5-7 pm, at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., 514 West 25th Street, New York.**



Robert Berling, *Studio Roof #4*, 2015, oil on linen, 30 x 80"