

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Clifford Odets at Michael Rosenfeld

Among Clifford Odets's plays, *Paradise Lost* (1938) was his favorite. It also provided the title for the recent Odets exhibition at Michael Rosenfeld, his second at the gallery. The show featured the small, richly colored, faux-naïf paintings on paper that the playwright completed between 1946 and 1956.

Today, few remember the towering reputation Odets enjoyed after his 1935 play *Waiting for Lefty*, depicting striking taxi drivers on strike, became a rallying cry for the labor movement. A member of New York's revolutionary Group Theatre, Odets penned a series of works exploring the plight of the Little Man. Later, he succumbed to the seductions of Hollywood where things did not go well for him. He died in 1963 as he was developing TV episodes of *Have Gun Will Travel*.

The 39 works at Rosenfeld are among hundreds combining watercolor, gouache and ink that the playwright produced for himself and friends during a painful, insomniac period when, among other difficulties, he labored under the cloud of threatened investigation by Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee for his early Communist affiliations. (He eventually gave in to pressures and fingered his friends.)

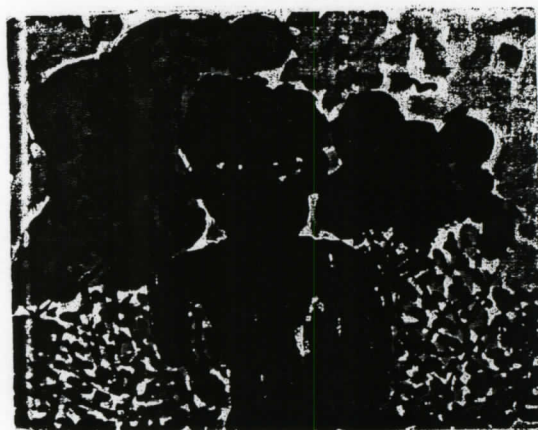
Odets avidly collected Klee and also had works by Chagall, Picasso and Horace Pippin. His own paintings reflect a somewhat jumbled stylistic range, revealing the efforts of a talented journeyman trying out approaches inspired by a variety of artistic heroes. *Lost in the Woods* (1947) displays Picassoesque looping segmentations

of space that morph into female faces peering in many directions. *Tropical Fishing* (1952), on the other hand, is a greeting-card-like, aquamarine-hued rendering featuring goofily large fish; it could have been a memento of an island boating trip.

In *Expressionist* (1948), probably a self-portrait, a man depicted in Fauvist colors with a red-orange face stands in a daubed garden staring out with a world-weary expression; a van Gogh crow flies across the background. It is tempting to read poignant autobiographic details into the show's title work of 1953 that interprets Milton's parable of the consequences of temptation embraced. In a subtly menacing yet bucolic wonderland, butterflies and bespectacled angels lounge about haplessly. Adam and Eve lie on the grass to one side next to a half-eaten apple; that pesky snake wryly pokes its head up from below.

In the bleak, bare room of *Asylum* (ca. 1948), skinny females occupy their own separate, deluded realities—one dances, two hug themselves, rocking back and forth. A painfully vulnerable bare-breasted figure in the foreground blankly confronts the viewer with her cartoony nudity. Putting his whimsical yet morose observations nakedly on display, Odets shows himself to be a nuanced observer of humanity and of himself.

—Carey Lovelace



Clifford Odets: *Expressionist*, 1948, watercolor and gouache on paper, 9 by 11½ inches; at Michael Rosenfeld.