

With Friends: Six Magic Realists 1940–1965

This exhibition is the first to focus on a specific group of artist-friends who were active in Chicago, Madison, and Milwaukee before making an impact on the national art world. Gertrude Abercrombie (1909–1977), Sylvia Fein (b. 1919), Marshall Glasier (1902–1988), Dudley Huppler (1917–1988), Karl Priebe (1914–1976), and John Wilde (b. 1919) came together gradually through interconnected relationships that had deep, lasting effects on their lives and art.

These six friends responded to similar artistic influences, shared a strong interest in autobiographical subject matter, and studied historical techniques practiced by fifteenth-century artists. In Dudley Huppler's words, they were "a close group, quite sympathetic to each other yet totally independent in manners." Throughout their lives they exchanged creative ideas, learned from one another, and supported each other's individual successes. Despite intimacy and professional compatibility they never held a formal group exhibition.

With Friends: Six Magic Realists is arranged thematically in order to reveal the strengths of the individual artists and the subtle interplay that occurred in their art. The group came together at the beginning of World War II, and each was affected by the international conflict. Many drawings and paintings of the 1940s address the war through analogies to mythology, such as Sylvia Fein's paintings of herself as Persephone in a world that seemed closer to Hades than an idyllic spring landscape. John Wilde, drafted into the army, found it difficult to reconcile the war's atrocities with the idea that it was for a higher cause. His wartime self-portraits make world trauma visible on the individual.

Each artist was fascinated by the natural world. Marshall Glasier, in particular, made the Wisconsin landscape his sanctuary and the setting for meditations on life and death. Abercrombie, Huppler, and others gravitated to objects that had personal associations and rendered them with a clarity that many considered "magical." This convergence of the intensely personal with the immediately recognizable contributed to their widespread recognition at a time when abstraction was championed by many art critics. Despite the group's preference for realism, they were shaped by many of the experiences and artistic influences common to their generation's abstract artists. The six artists of this group contributed to the development of modern American art in the postwar art world. Their dynamic and eccentric personalities attracted a diverse group of supporters who considered nature and the body to be powerful, resonant subjects for modern art.

EXHIBITION SPONSORS

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What is “Magic Realism”?

Magic realism was not a formal art movement. Like many terms in art history it was a convenient label invented by critics to describe a stylistic trend. Art historian H. H. Arnason succinctly defined the “magic realist,” as an artist who “creates mystery and the marvelous through juxtapositions that are disturbing even when it is difficult to see exactly why,” or translated “everyday experience into strangeness.” All of the artists included in *With Friends* were called magic realists during their careers; some acknowledged that the term came close to describing their unusually detailed, often fantastic representations of the natural world. A few contemporaries who were described this way, such as Ivan Albright (1897–1983), Paul Cadmus (1904–1999), and George Tooker (born 1920), rejected the label.

“Magic realism” was a popular buzzword during the 1940s. The Museum of Modern Art, New York organized its 1943 *Americans* contemporary group exhibition around the theme. Many artists described as magic realists, including Gertrude Abercrombie, Dudley Huppler, and John Wilde, showed at the Edwin Hewitt Gallery in New York. These exhibitions led to public perception that magic realism was a cohesive movement. Despite this confusion, the artists admitted common bonds and did exhibit together with a feeling of kinship. They preferred to be seen as independents making modern art from a realist rather than an abstract viewpoint.