Thinker, 1982



Robert Moskowitz derives his images from the history of art (the ancient Greek Discobolus, Rodin's Thinker, Brancusi's Bird in Space) and from common icons of the contemporary world (the World Trade Center, the Eddystone Lighthouse).

Although Moskowitz views the images as anthropomorphic, he invites multiple interpretations of his work. The World Trade Center towers, for example, can be seen as two simple rectangles against a neutral ground, an icon of the contemporary urban environment, or as two figures. Because of the emphatic verticality of many of his images, phallic associations also exist, but all may be regarded as symbols of the artist, as well. The artist as philosopher is implicit in Rodin's heroic sculpture; the artist as the existential outsider resonates in Giacometti's attenuated figure; the artist as seeker of transcendent truths is symbolized in Brancusi's abstracted bird. According to Moskowitz, even Iceberg, one of the few horizontal works in the exhibition, can be read anthropomorphically as an isolated figure in a landscape.

The subjects are all familiar to us through twodimensional, photographic reproduction, and while Moskowitz emphasizes their flatness, he allows that the illusion of depth may be present at the same time. As he said of Iceberg, "When you first see it, it looks like a cartoon. It's a very slow painting and takes a long time to look at, and then all of a sudden it gets very, very deep, almost deeper than anything I've done."\*

The opposition of flatness and depth has been a consistent element in Moskowitz's work, since his architectural paintings of the early seventies where images float in faintly delineated interior spaces. An admirer of the nongestural Abstract Expressionist masters such as Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and, of course, Ad Reinhardt, Moskowitz developed his own vocabulary during the subsequent Minimalist period. While sharing with the Minimalists a preference for simple, pared down form and attention to the flatness of the picture plane, Moskowitz always balances abstraction with figuration, formal concerns with symbolic content.

The use of archetypical imagery, stripped of contextual detail, also marks the work of several other painters of Moskowitz's generation, such as Susan Rothenberg (MATRIX 3), Neil Jenney and Jonathan Borofsky (MATRIX 10). Dubbed "New Image" painters in a 1978 Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition, these artists developed out of a Minimalist point of view but were part of a general return to figuration that has characterized recent painting.

Moskowitz may work on a painting over a period of years. Although his palette is reductive, the viewer is made aware of the many layers of oil paint that lie beneath the surface--red underpainting glows through an otherwise dark surface in Skyscraper III and Bowler; black undercoating in The Razor's Edge (for Bill Murray) reveals itself

through the dominant red sky area.

Variation of surface color exists in the drawings, as well. Rather than being studies for the paintings, the pastels are often produced afterwards. "I had the idea of making a drawing, full scale, of every painting I've done wihin the last ten years... I like to draw. "\* The immediacy of the drawings provides the artist with a release from his painstaking method of painting. "I like the physicality of drawing. The marks in the ground basically come out of making the drawing, whereas in the painting that's not true."\* Th smudges and erasures in the pastels are palpable evidence of the artist's creation, and, much as the fingermarks on the surface of the clay enliven a Giacometti sculpture, these spontaneous marks excite Moskowitz's large-scale works on paper.

Moskowitz's works achieve their strength through the careful balancing of a complex set of conditions and relationships.

Neither definitively abstract or realistic, flat or illusionistic, obvious or obscure, they are powerful evocations of man in the world.

Moskowitz was born in New York in 1935. Self-taught as an artist, he has continued to live and work in New York, where he is represented by the Blum-Helman Gallery.

Constance Lewallen

\* All quotes from 1985 Hayden Gallery, MIT, catalogue. Works in MATRIX (all works lent by Blum-Helman Gallery, NY, unless otherwise noted):

- 1. Thinker, 1982, pastel on paper, 53 x 31-1/4".
- 2. Black Bird, 1982, oil on canvas, 63 x 20-1/2".
- 3. Bowler, 1982-84, oil on canvas, 108 x 44-5/8".
- 4. Giacometti Piece, 1983-84, oil on canvas, 108 x 41-9/16".
- 5. Eddystone, 1984, pastel on paper, 108 x 48". Lent by Paine Webber, NY.
- 6. Giacometti Piece (for Bob Holman), 1984, pastel on paper, 108 x 41-9/16".
- 7. Bowler, 1984, pastel on paper, 109 x 44-5/8".
- 8. Thinker, 1982, oil on canvas, 108 x 63".
- 9. <u>Iceberg</u>, 1984, oil and latex on canvas, 56 x 157-3/8". Lent by The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
- 10. Skyscraper III, 1984, oil and latex on canvas, 2 panels, each 122 x 29".
- 11. The Razor's Edge, 1985, pastel on paper, 30 x 72".
- 12. The Razor's Edge (for Bill Murray), 1985, oil on canvas, 30-1/8" x 72".
- 13. Red Cross, 1986, pastel on paper,  $\frac{38-1}{8} \times \frac{38-1}{8}$ .

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Leo Castelli Gallery, NY,
'62; Nancy Hoffman Gallery,
NY, '73, '74; Daniel Weinberg
Gallery, S.F., '79, '80;
Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis, MN, '81
(traveled to The Hudson River
Museum, Yonkers, NY;
catalogue); Blum-Helman
Gallery, NY, '83, '86
(catalogues).

Selected group exhibitions:

The Museum of Modern Art, NY, The Art of Assemblage, '61 (catalogue); Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY, Mixed Media and Pop Art, '63 (catalogue); Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Annuals and Biennials, '69, '73, '79, '81 (catalogues); Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, New Image Painting, '78 (catalogue); Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY, American Painting of the 1970's, '78 (traveled, catalogue); La Biennale di Venezia, '80 (catalogue); Kunsthalle, Basel, Switzerland, Robert Moskowitz, Susan Rothenberg and Julian Schnabel, '81 (traveled, catalogue); The Museum of Modern Art, NY, An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture, '84 (catalogue); Hayden Gallery, MIT, Robert Moskowitz and Judith Shea, '85 (traveled; catalogue, with essay by Katy Kline).

Selected bibliography (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Pincus-Witten, Robert.
"Robert Moskowitz," Artforum,
June '70.

Smith, Roberta. "The Abstract Image," Art in America," March-April '79.

Silverthorne, Jeanne.
"Robert Moskowitz.

"Robert Moskowitz,
Viewpoints, Hudson River
Museum," Artforum, Nov. '81.

Larson, Kay. "Monuments and Meanings," New York

Magazine, March 14, '83.

Schwartz, Ellen.

"What's New in Nueva York,"
Artnews, April '84.

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