



Herman Rose, *West Street Rooftops*, 1978. Oil on canvas, 10½ x 21¾". Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery.

THE WORLD THROUGH ROSE-COLORED GLASSES

RALPH POMEROY Painters like Herman Rose have to produce enough paintings over a period of time, successful to their vision, to convince us finally of what they have discovered.

It is curious that just lately, especially lately, it seems that a good many people react negatively to expressions of positive joyousness and beauty. The "put down," the "bad" are all the rage in art circles and any revelation of fineness is looked upon as old hat or weak. Forget the lucidity and candor of Winslow Homer or Thomas Eakins, the elegance of Charles Demuth or the reach for the sublime by Mark Rothko. Go for the cynical over the superior.

These quarrelsome thoughts have been aroused by Herman Rose's recent exhibition at the Sid Deutsch Gallery. For some time now—since at least his 1967 exhibition at the Zabriskie Gallery—there has been considerable disquiet about Rose's paintings. This unrest has been expressed by people disposed toward (in some cases, even in love with) his work. Or is it the *idea* of his work? I wonder. This happens a great deal to artists of great individuality. People want them to continue doing whatever it was that captured their allegiance in the first place.

The "Herman Rose problem" seems to center primarily on his color. In the old days of Rose's first fame, there was a magnificent somberness about most of his paintings. They seemed to threaten, almost like an impending storm, in their beautiful darkneses. This soberness of color, combined with originality of paint application—a kind of updating of Impressionist techniques (Thomas B. Hess, writing about Rose at the time, remarked that his conception of painted surface was "in its way, distinctly American avant-garde"—and powerful composition, led Dorothy Miller to choose him as one of "Fifteen Americans" for the Museum of Modern Art exhibition of that name in 1952. And rightly, to my mind. For Rose's work "made sense" as that of a truly modern artist even when coupled with the likes of Rothko and Still.

One of the picture captions related to Hess' article on the Modern's show, published in *Art News*, refers to Rose as "a vet-



Herman Rose, *Self-Portrait*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 12¼ x 15¾". Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery.



Herman Rose, Redentore, Venice, 1978. Oil on canvas, 20 x 14 1/2". Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery.

Herman Rose, San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, 1978. Oil on canvas, 19-5/8 x 10 3/4". Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery.



can but generally unappreciated painter."² That is still true, at least with reference to any sort of wide or general public. However, over the years, Rose has been awarded grants and prizes and been added to the collections of such museums as the Whitney, Museum of Modern Art, and Hirshhorn. Critics and artists have praised his work regularly. He has been written about by Fairfield Porter, Lawrence Campbell, Stuart Preston, Hilton Kramer, Scott Burton, Lawrence Alloway, and Theodore Wolff, as well as the above-mentioned Thomas Hess. But it is not easy to work against the great current of Modernism with its general rejection of the past and its insistence on the continuous breaking of new ground. Lately, though, this belief has been questioned more and more as the only "right way" to proceed.

An individual seeing the world anew, the *figurative* world in this case, can, by the originality of his perception, strike a truly new note as surely as any advance man of the abstract army. The difficulty lies in the fact that such an individual demands that we look at the material world, which we assume we know well, as something new. We must, our seeing must, be reborn, and that is often very hard on us. It takes time to discover truths. Better to go for the quick take. So painters such as Morandi (with whom Rose has been intelligently compared) and Rose have to produce enough paintings over a period of time, successful to their vision, to finally convince us of what they have discovered.

Morandi said that he was a slow worker. He also once asked a friend who owned one of his landscapes if he recognized the subject of that painting in the view from his window. When the friend failed to do so, Morandi aimed a pair of binoculars at the scene and told him to look again.³ This is a wonderful story about "distancing" (literally in this instance) often practiced by visionary artists. Rose has found working from rooftops and other heights a way to achieve abstraction of representational forms. Distance enables him to see forms in a geometric manner in the same way that Cézanne's quarries and Picasso's Spanish villages helped to give them insights into geometry and perception.

Many of Rose's finest paintings and drawings are views of New York City observed across a complexity of intervening roofs along with a series of windowsill still lifes giving onto those same rooftops. Part of this preference of viewpoint is a simple need for privacy, the absence of distraction such locations provide—necessities to the meditative painter who likes to gaze upon the "outside world."

In his exhibition of work done over the past seven years, Rose, now 72, showed his familiar repertoire. There were oils, watercolors, and monotypes dealing with still lifes, landscapes, cityscapes, and portraits. Again a certain restlessness was revealed, a need to get away without getting away, which has emerged from Rose's work for some time. We have views of Paris and Venice in France; Portugal; Spain; Venice; Maine—even Santa Monica—as well as the expected studies of New York. I was going to write "get away to joy" before; there is something about the paintings and the places that suggests a search for quiet, for sunlight, even for conventional beauty. It is interesting that three, or at least two, of the strongest paintings in the exhibition were of Venice, that picturesque killer of a place that even Morandi, who reportedly adored it, was afraid to tackle.⁴ Something about the physical shapes of that sublime town, combined with the "distancing" enforced by views across water—the "rooftop intermediaries"—encouraged Rose to compose daringly and with great power. I am thinking particularly of a painting of the Church of the Redentore seen across a dance of wavelets cut forcefully by the horizontal line of a quay and the right foreground vertical of the corner of a building. An ironic note is introduced by a series of little dark windows set in the smaller buildings surrounding the great church, "making up" for the domineering mass of Palladio's structure. This has wit. And Rose is a witty artist.

Another view of Venice presents us with a foreground quay leading toward a small dock and a bridge of stairs which seems to promise easy access to the distant glory of San Giorgio Maggiore. Pictorially, this "promise" is achieved by the placement of the bridge summit on the same horizontal line as the far buildings. Wit is given a charming nudge by the positioning of a small figure on the bridge.



VENICE
Herman Rose, *Venice at Noon*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 18 x 16½".
Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery.

A beautiful example of Rose's ability to balance a distant focus of interest with a complex, rich foreground is a landscape painted in Portugal. In the foreground red flowers glow brilliantly amid foliage while a delicate spray of leaves intrudes from the left, easing, as it were, the passage across a "barrier" of water (this is indeed an inlet separating Portugal from Spain) to the dryish shore opposite with its white chapel and water-seconding sky.

Among the other landscapes are splendid studies of the Portuguese hill town of Coimbra; a villa with gates and masses of foliage and a hill arching at the back; boats at rest near old walls; the quays along the Seine. Frankly, a number of these landscapes have a conventional air. Also, Rose's interest in detail can become finicky in an effort to impart too much information. I'm not sure about the Maine pictures either. They strike me as thin, pale—hesitant? Unknown territory or unfelt as yet, perhaps. The best by far is a simple view of a lake under a vast, reflected sky with pines and houses mirrored as well. It is understandable as a response to specific light. Rose has demonstrated his mastery with light many times. As Hilton Kramer once wrote with reference to his paintings of New York, but which could apply equally in this instance, "It is a realm of almost pastoral beauty, an imaginary realm born of the light that is now the medium of the artist's sensibility."⁵ (Kramer is describing Rose's idealization of New York City.)

Light plays just as great a role in Rose's marvelous still lifes. Among those in his recent show is one of four peaches nesting in a paper bag, guarded by two "sentinels"—glass bottles, one holding a pansy, the other a wild rose—set before a luminous, pearlsh background fairly limitless in its spatial implications and delicacy. Another shows cherries and fruit "supporting" a vase of flowers in a symmetrical, or at least central, arrangement. A large still life with African sculpture, a scale, shells, bottles, a candle, flowers, etc.—a studio clutter evocative of certain Ensors—set amid warm grays with the light speculative between many of the objects, and everything held together by background verticals and the long horizontal of the shelf or table, achieves considerable drama.

The finest still life strikes me as that of a blue cup or pot supporting a vase of flowers and backed by a strange, dark, two-eared form suggesting both protection and menace. The forms stack vertically against the light, disorienting spatial relationships. In another still life a small gesturing figure and a bottle and plant meld into an intricate cityscape. This is typical of Rose's "playfulness" with space.



Herman Rose, *Westbeth Rooftops with Still Life*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 16-5/8 x 18".
Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery.

Stacking in depth, foreshortening of perspective, close color tonalities, shadowlessness for all intents and purposes, are the means by which Rose is able to bridge the air and light between the interior and exterior, between near and far.

The portraits are not as successful. Like Morandi, Rose seems at his best away from the human figure. Of the few portraits included in the show, the best is probably a small self-portrait. It is an unflinching self-examination, appropriately nude, at work, hand supporting a drawing board, eyeglasses in place. A background sketch and various objects establish a studio location. An ageing artist at work, seeing. Of the other portraits I like the ones without busy backgrounds: a profile of a young man in a checked shirt, absolutely straightforward; a man plus a glimpse through a window of New York rooftops—just enough of Rose's special world without competing with the figure.

I began by remarking that the present "Herman Rose problem" had to do with color. The somber, superbly tonal hues of his earlier paintings have increasingly given way to bold, gay pinks and blues, yellows, turquoises. It is a world of enamels and jewels, of sunlight and flowers. It can be dangerous territory for an artist.

High color, like high comedy, often comes late to creative lives. Certainly in youth there is brightness, boldness, but of a different kind. After the serious matters of emotional and tonal control, after the hill has been climbed, so to speak, the realization of the impossibility of achieving perfection often leads to a gaiety of sadness, a daring exemplified by such artists in their old age as Matisse and Miró. Not true of everyone of course, but it is true of Rose. His late work shows a fearlessness—a fearlessness of sweetness, of beguiling form and color, of pleasure as subject matter. He has become liberated to the extent that his "shameless" lyricism—his sky blues, lavenders, apple greens, spring pinks—can even bear the conceit of pointing to the punning implications of his name.

The threatening storm no longer holds him in thrall.

1. Foreword to *American Contemporary Artists* catalogue, 1956.

2. *Art News*, April 1952.

3. Luigi Magnani, "Portrait of Morandi," catalogue for Des Moines Art Center, 1981.

4. "One day, long ago in Venice, on seeing Morandi contemplating in admiration the glittering expanse of the lagoon, I asked him why he did not wish to paint it since he loved it so much. 'You see,' he said, pointing to a house which stood behind us, 'if I could spend three years looking out the window up there, perhaps then I could do it.'" Luigi Magnani, *ibid*.

5. *The New York Times*, Sunday, May 21, 1967.