

DOCUMENTS AND MINUTES OF THE GENERAL FACULTY
REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
ROBERT L. LEVERS, JR.

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a Memorial Resolution for Robert L. Levers, Jr., Professor, Department of Art and Art History, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

H. Paul Kelley, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM

ROBERT L. LEVERS, JR.

For over thirty years Robert Levers taught painting in the Department of Art and for many of his colleagues and students came to embody the archetype of the artist as those in the profession saw it. He was born April 11, 1930, in Brooklyn, New York, the son of an English father with artistic interests and an energetic and ambitious New England mother, who got him a scholarship to a good boys' school (St. Luke's, in New Canaan, Conn.). In high school Bob earned money for college by painting watercolor views of people's houses, the beginning of his lifelong dedication to the practice of art.

He entered Yale University in 1948 when it was gaining the reputation as the place for artists to study, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1952. Always productive, he drew cartoons for the Yale Record in a style reminiscent of Peter Arno. Waiting to fulfill his military obligation by enlistment in the Navy, Levers worked for the New York advertising agency J. Walter Thompson as an idea man, finally entering the Navy in 1954. Looking at his later paintings and drawings, one might imagine that he was storming beaches during his Navy duty, but in actuality his ship was mostly in the Caribbean. Bob liked the sea and enjoyed shipboard life, but was not cut out for a life in the Navy.

In 1954 Bob and Mary Lou Schlichting had married, and by the time he completed his Navy duty in 1957 they had two children: Robert (born 1955) and Penny (born 1957). The Famous Artists School, a correspondence school based in Westport, Conn., employed Levers full-time for two years before he returned to Yale for a Master of Fine Arts degree (1959-1961). The Famous Artists School turned out to be a good experience: a congenial group of artists, the opportunity to learn to teach, and most of all the chance to really learn to draw. For the rest of his life Levers stood out from most of the artists around him by his mastery of drawing, which provided him with a means of expression richer and more flexible than was common among artists of his time. He continued to work summers for the School during his graduate studies, for which he also had GI Bill support.

His early training at Yale had a traditional Beaux Arts slant, which was not uncongenial to Levers, but his last year's studies were with Josef Albers, famous for his non-objective squares in carefully studied color relationships. The famous "Albers' Color Course," which influenced a whole generation of Yale art students, formed the basis of Levers' thinking about color the rest of his life. Although the later work we associate with the name Levers is an almost total rejection of the abstract traditions associated with the

name Albers, nevertheless Bob liked Albers personally and found him a valuable teacher. The MFA degree, Bob said in rare moments of cynicism, was a union card, and so it immediately proved to be.

In September, 1961, Levers accepted a position on the studio faculty of the Department of Art at the University of Texas. The Levers planned to stay for two years, hoping to work their way back to the east coast after that. Their second daughter Polly was born the first fall in Austin. Levers had exhibited his art extensively by the time he arrived in Austin, the work in a misty realistic style, "things falling out of closets, Sidney Dickenson style," in the words of Mary Lou. During the summer of 1963 the family made the first of many short trips to Mexico, which culminated in longer trips in 1968, 1969, and a fall semester in 1970. Levers described that semester: "I resided in Mexico City, painting and drawing every day with frequent trips to galleries and museums, except for a ten day trip to the Yucatan Peninsula to view Mayan ruins." He was especially interested in the Pre-Columbian art in the Anthropology Museum, but its influence was so deeply absorbed as to be invisible in his art. According to Mary Lou, the figures with long snouts that emerged in his art after 1970 were inspired by a mixture of Maya architectural ornaments in Yucatan with the polluted air of Mexico City. The sight of traffic officers in the city inspired his comment, "How long can these cops last in this air!" In his drawings and paintings throughout the mid-70's the officers turn into gas-masked soldiers, and later into skeletal red-necks. Throughout these years, he was exhibiting all over the United States, his style growing flatter and more colorful during the late '60s, then developing cartoon-like strips and complicated multiple spaces in the '70s, sometimes inspired by television images, though, as with everything he saw, they were entirely absorbed into his own style. Beginning to show his work at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery (and its successors) in Houston in the '70s marked a new stage in the public acceptance of his work, which continued to be popular with collectors on a national scene. But the Levers family had become fixtures in the Austin scene.

In 1980 Levers was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Artist's Fellowship in painting that allowed him to draw and paint full-time in New York during 1980-81. This period marked a turning point in his work toward more ambitious compositions and a richer use of color and atmosphere. Though he had never been one to cut himself off from earlier art, during that year he absorbed the collections of the New York museums. "I had a memorable afternoon," he wrote later, "in the drawing storage room at the Met, holding in my hands original drawings by G. B. Tiepolo and Rubens, among others, marvelling at the feeling of monumentality and vitality in those small and sketchy drawings."

In 1984 Levers was selected as one of the United States' representatives to the Venice Biennale, an exceptional honor. At that time he made his first trip to Europe, of which the fruits continued to be harvested the rest of his life. "My purpose was to research Renaissance and Baroque figure painting, make notes and sketches, and return home to begin a series of large paintings involving life-size or nearly life-size figures, which I did. This led my gallery, the Watson/deNagy Gallery in Houston inviting me to have 3 one-man shows over a period of 5 years of work generated by this experience." One of the paintings was *God Creating the Animals*, which was inspired by a Tintoretto seen in the Accademia in Venice.

In an essay on Levers, Joan Seeman Robinson described the major painting of this period: "...when Levers painted *The Destruction of Memorial Stadium* in 1983, he switched his focus from the human figure to a visionary rendition of the most conspicuous edifice on campus. Within a vast landscape peppered with expiring fires sit the disintegrating remains of the huge amphitheater, tier upon tier of decks and porticoes bearing hovels of refugees like the forlorn survivors of some apocalyptic conflagration." Levers himself described it this way: "One night I had a dream about Memorial Stadium burning down. In my dream, it had been capable of accomodating a million people, all of whom were scurrying around, many with banners. It was a troubling dream; I had no idea what it meant or why I'd had it, but since I usually make art to find out what I think and feel, I began a painting. In the process of painting I realized something fairly obvious, I guess—the apocalyptic metaphor—and I saw it would be necessary to document everything that went on in the Stadium as it burned—riots, orgies, the summary execution of the presumed arsonist, lights flickering in the stadium steamroom.... One thing seemed to lead to another." This important work, now in a private collection in New York, was a mine of inspiration for the artist.

In the fall of 1989 Levers described his work this way: "For about 15 years my paintings and drawings have been involved with the examination of conflict, chaos, and destruction.... I think I am distilling some sorts of truth from these images, although I am delighted to be able to say that a certain pressure in my forehead tells me that this series of paintings and drawings is far from concluded.... I have been encouraged by the attention this work has received from a number of directions." His plans for the fall of 1990 were to complete a new series of paintings and drawings "examining the terrorist theme from a number of different viewpoints, seeing it variously through the eyes of the terrorist himself, his victims, and those who would rather not think about the issues and its causes and consequences." At that time he was working to complete several large paintings, among them a 48x60-inch oil entitled *Terrorists on Stage with Plates*, to be shown in a ten-year retrospective at Austin's Laguna Gloria Museum. The opening of that exhibition on September 7, 1991, attracted an overflow crowd of enthusiastic admirers. The painter had prepared some comments, but there was no space for him to stand inside the museum. Most of the crowd was lured out to the front steps, where, despite a spattering of rain, he spoke briefly, satisfying the crowd with a few modest, philosophical, and funny remarks.

That event, seen in retrospect, crowned Robert Levers' lifetime of achievements. On February 6, 1992, he died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-one. Levers' departure made it clear that he had played two separate roles, only one of which had ended. His role as a teacher and faculty colleague remains only in memory, while his work survives as full of life as ever. "He was the epitome of a mentor. He would spend hours counseling students, critiquing their work and arguing issues of policy, academics, standards and causes with his colleagues," recalls a faculty colleague. "Robert was also a great supporter of young faculty, socializing with them, drawing out their ideas, engaging them in debates on everything from the creative process to U.T. football." His students presented Mary Lou with a document signed by sixteen of them recalling things he had said to them: "Don't be afraid to be good at something." "An idea is not art; it's just an idea." "If you are having problems, use a bigger brush and work faster." "Nothing is anything by itself, only in relation to other things." "You can't build a painting. You have to let it grow and develop like a child." A friend summed up his teaching: "He touched everyone he knew and worked with by his kindness and sincere interest in the progress of their art and lives."

While the role of teacher ended, the role of artist ended only in the sense that the series of works was completed. Art lives in its relationship with its audience, and in Levers' case that relationship is still in its infancy. Levers "dedication to his art was total," a friend remembers, but he rarely had time to dedicate himself totally to it. His year in New York was very important to him, to paint everyday or go to the Metropolitan Museum, and he sometimes wondered if he should stop teaching and dedicate himself full-time to his art. Despite the demands of teaching and committee work, he was still able to list 135 exhibits of his work on the "selected" list. He was at the peak of his powers when he died, leaving many ideas still briefly stated in his work but still to be explored.

For the retrospective show in 1991 he prepared a large (35x47 inches) soft-ground etching, working at Austin's Flatbed Press, with the ironic title *Victory: the Celebration*. It shows a military band of three uniformed skeletons conducted by a tall-hatted bandleader, all operated by strings that disappear at the top margin. The fires of burning oil wells smudge the sky. A grim, masculine roughness marks the style, relieved by the macabre humor. This great work revived the military theme of many of his paintings and drawings of the Vietnam War period, but brought it to a new level that was full of promise of more great work to come. Perhaps it is the luck of an artist to die young, whatever his age. And Levers' audience has barely begun to explore the collection of work he left.

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Terence Grieder (Chair), Lee Chesney, and Gibbs Milliken.

Distributed to Voting and Emeritus Members of the faculty of the Department of Art and Art History, the Dean of the College of Fine Arts, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on August 31, 1995.