

JUST IN
MARTHA MAYER
ERLEBACHER



WoodmereArtMuseum
TELLING THE STORY OF PHILADELPHIA'S ART AND ARTISTS

Just In Martha Mayer Erlebacher

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January 11 – March 2, 2014

WoodmereArtMuseum
TELLING THE STORY OF **PHILADELPHIA'S** ART AND ARTISTS

FOREWORD

WILLIAM R. VALERIO, PHD

The Patricia Van Burgh Allison
Director and CEO

I came to know Martha Mayer Erlebacher (1937-2013) very early in my tenure as director of Woodmere Art Museum. She introduced herself to me in October 2010 at a reception at the Museum, and our professional relationship and friendship evolved from that moment. Martha had already given Woodmere a number of important works by her husband, the extraordinary figurative sculptor Walter Erlebacher (1933-1991). She shared her hope that, as the Museum's new director, I would be interested in showing his work in the context of Philadelphia's great history of realism. She was too modest to mention anything about her own work. But before long her fiercely anatomical yet emotive figurative realism captured my attention as a significant contribution to contemporary conversations in the arts. We have proudly included Walter's and Martha's work in numerous exhibitions at

Woodmere over the last three years.

This exhibition is a tribute to Martha. The paintings, drawings, and sketches on view represent the trajectory of her career, with a focus on her symbolic use of the nude as a metaphor for the condition of humanity. A majority of these works are gifts to Woodmere from Martha's sons, Adrian Erlebacher and Jonah Erlebacher, to whom we are most grateful. Our commitment to stewarding their parents' legacies with care and passion is unwavering. We also extend special thanks to Frances and Robert Kohler, who have long been generous donors to Woodmere. We are pleased to show two important paintings by Martha, *In a Garden* (1976) and *Self-Portrait* (1989), which were part of their gift.

Martha brought a measure of creative humor to all of her endeavors. I will never forget the triumph of the "turducken" (a boneless chicken stuffed inside a boneless duck, all stuffed inside a boneless turkey) that she once prepared as the main course for a dinner party. Martha told us with a laugh that she

had spent her day deboning. But with its elegant sauces, the turducken was a delicious extravagance fit for the czars, and we, her friends, were made to feel very special. Good humor is a part of her art as well, and we are thrilled to show her four *Trompe, Trompe* paintings of grapes. Martha explained to me that each of these works is a double *trompe l'oeil*: first, an illusion of grapes, and second, not an illusion of real grapes, but of fake

ones in alabaster, plastic, marble, or wood. Her virtuosity was such that she could flaunt her ability to pull this off.

As director, it is my privilege to speak on behalf of Woodmere's staff, volunteers, and trustees and say that we all miss Martha. This exhibition is our small way of expressing our admiration and thanks.



Untitled by Martha Mayer Erlebacher (Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher)



Antonelli I Gallery, Woodmere Art Museum

ANTONELLI | GALLERY

A painter of great distinction, Martha Mayer Erlebacher is broadly considered one of the important interpreters of figurative realism in American art.

This exhibition focuses on her symbolic use of the nude as a metaphor for her changing views on the state of humanity. *Apollo* (1971), the earliest painting on view, represents a world that is youthful and optimistic in its order and unblemished beauty. *In a Garden* (1976) and *The Death of Orpheus* (1997) convey darker sentiments about a society in decline.

The exhibition also demonstrates the process of Erlebacher's visual thinking through the juxtaposition of monumental paintings with preparatory drawings and oil sketches. In general, the artist drew from live models and prepared sketches and drawings in order to establish broad relationships between formal elements and symbolic characters.

Erlebacher herself had wanted Woodmere, with its focus on telling the story of Philadelphia's art and artists, to be the museum that preserves her legacy and that of her husband, sculptor Walter Erlebacher. We are honored to do so. Woodmere is most grateful to Erlebacher and to her sons, Adrian Erlebacher and Jonah Erlebacher, and their families for recognizing the significance of our mission and for making many generous gifts of her work.



Self-Portrait
1989
Oil on canvas

Gift of Frances and Robert Kohler, 2004

Erlebacher was glad to receive portrait commissions throughout her career, and she made many self-portraits. She was drawn to self-portraiture, but also struggled with its revealing nature. She chose to hide her eyes in the shadow of the brim of a hat in this particular painting because “the eyes are the window to the soul, and I don’t want to reveal too much about myself.”



Apollo

1971

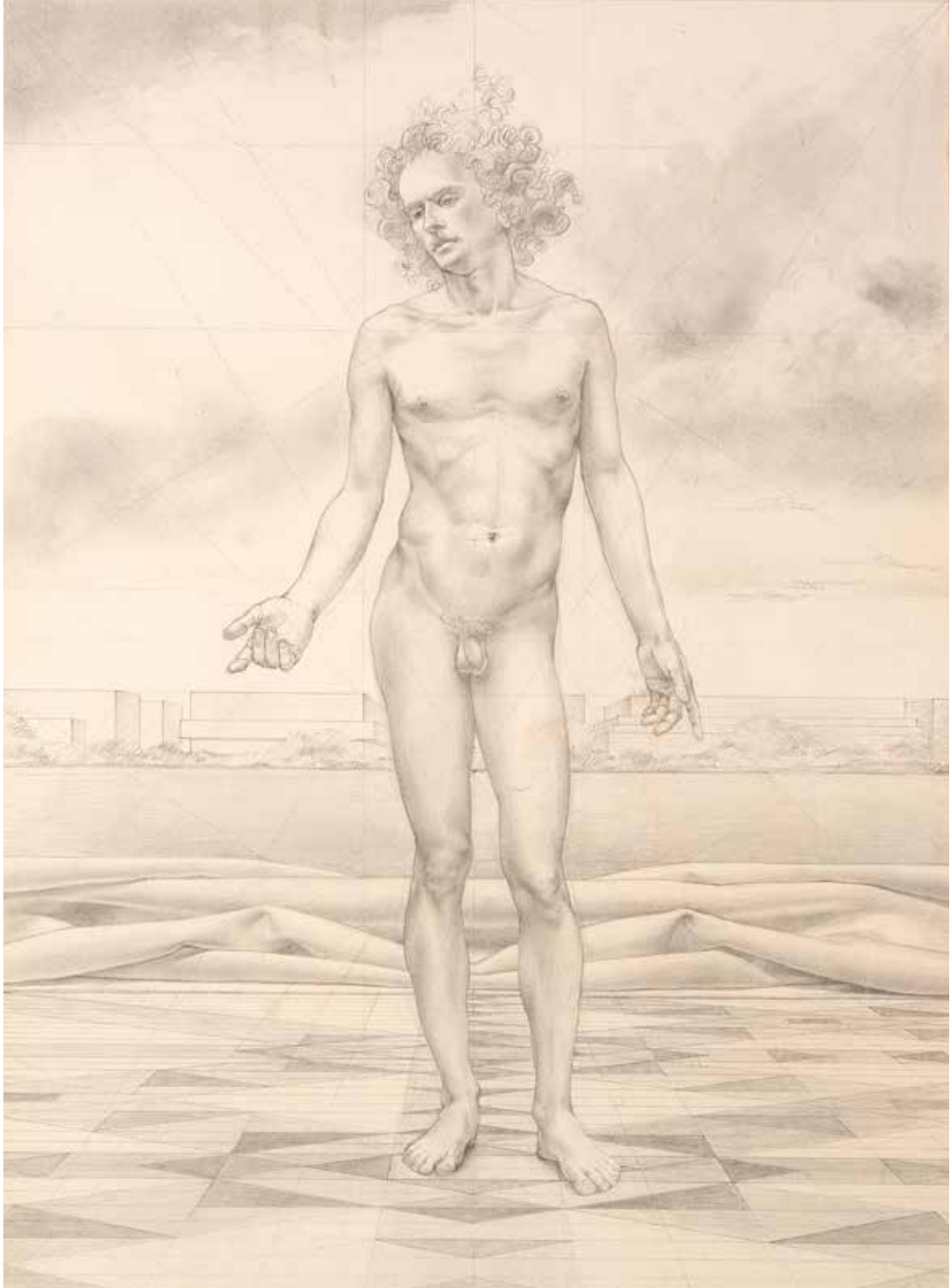
Oil on canvas

Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

Erlebacher's *Apollo* recalls the figure of Venus in Sandro Botticelli's Italian Renaissance masterpiece, *The Birth of Venus* (1482-85). The youthful god of truth, beauty, music, and light stands in a contrapposto pose, his luxurious blond hair flowing and his body bathed in a silvery, bright light. Like Venus, his unblemished body represents all that is pure and beautiful in mankind. He stands on a ground of ruled and ordered geometry, and behind him a fallen curtain suggests that he is newly born into the world as a mature being. The geometry of the buildings on the far shore suggests

that the setting for this symbolic revelation is the modern age.

Born in 1937 in Jersey City, New Jersey, Martha Mayer Erlebacher earned her BA in industrial design and her MFA at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. She and her husband, sculptor Walter Erlebacher, taught at Pratt until 1966, at which time the couple relocated to Philadelphia, each of them having accepted a teaching position at the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts). Martha taught at the University of the Arts until 1993, although by that time she had already joined the faculty of the New York Academy of Art, a school dedicated to classical training in the figurative arts. There she served in leadership positions through 2006, contributing substantially to the development of the academic curriculum. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is included in the collections of many museums, including Woodmere, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Yale University Art Gallery, the Fogg Museum at Harvard University, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and many others.



Untitled

1971

Graphite on paper

Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

This preparatory sketch reveals the deliberate manner in which Erlebacher created the atmosphere and light that defines the moods of her paintings. Here, gray graphite suggests a brooding clouded sky. In the finished painting, soft white clouds float on a clear blue horizon.



Study after Apollo of W.E. (Walter Erlebacher)

1968

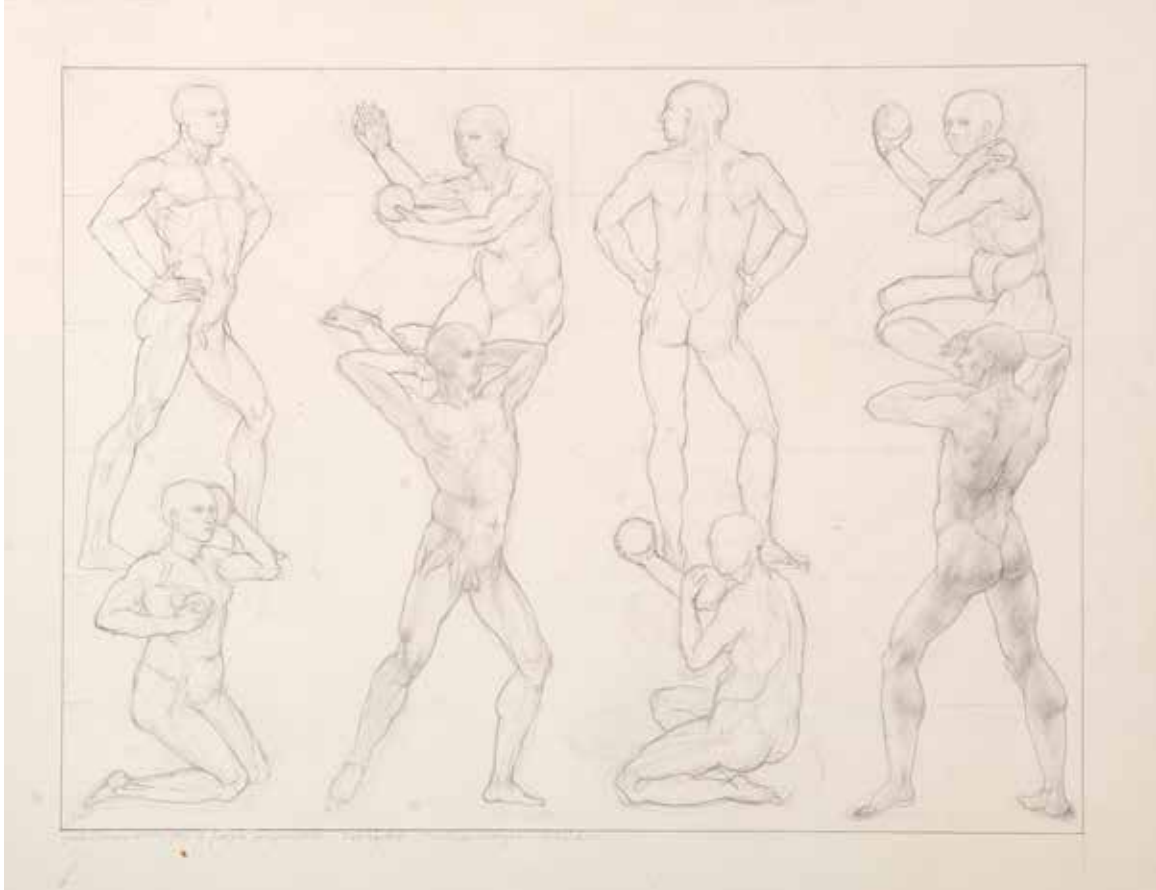
Red pencil on paper

Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher



Erlebacher's husband, Walter Erlebacher, was a figurative sculptor who was passionate in his intent to understand and render the human form with anatomical precision. Here, Martha Erlebacher draws from one of his several sculptures of the god Apollo. Confident outline and subtle shading in red pencil focus attention on the precise forms and interconnections between the muscles of the shoulders, torso, chest, abdomen, and legs. Both artists looked to the Italian Renaissance for inspiration: the figure's outstretched arms are reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's iconic drawing, *The Vitruvian Man*.

Death of Apollo, 1975 by Walter Erlebacher (Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher)



Preliminary Cartoon for
Eight-Figure Composition
1968
Graphite on paper

Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

This beautiful sketch may have been a practice exercise for Erlebacher; it demonstrates her ability to accurately depict the human form from a great variety of angles and positions. As the artist reveals in the conversation transcribed in the exhibition catalogue, she was fascinated by anatomy manuals for artists and by Italian Renaissance pattern books that showed artists how to portray the figure from a variety of perspectives.



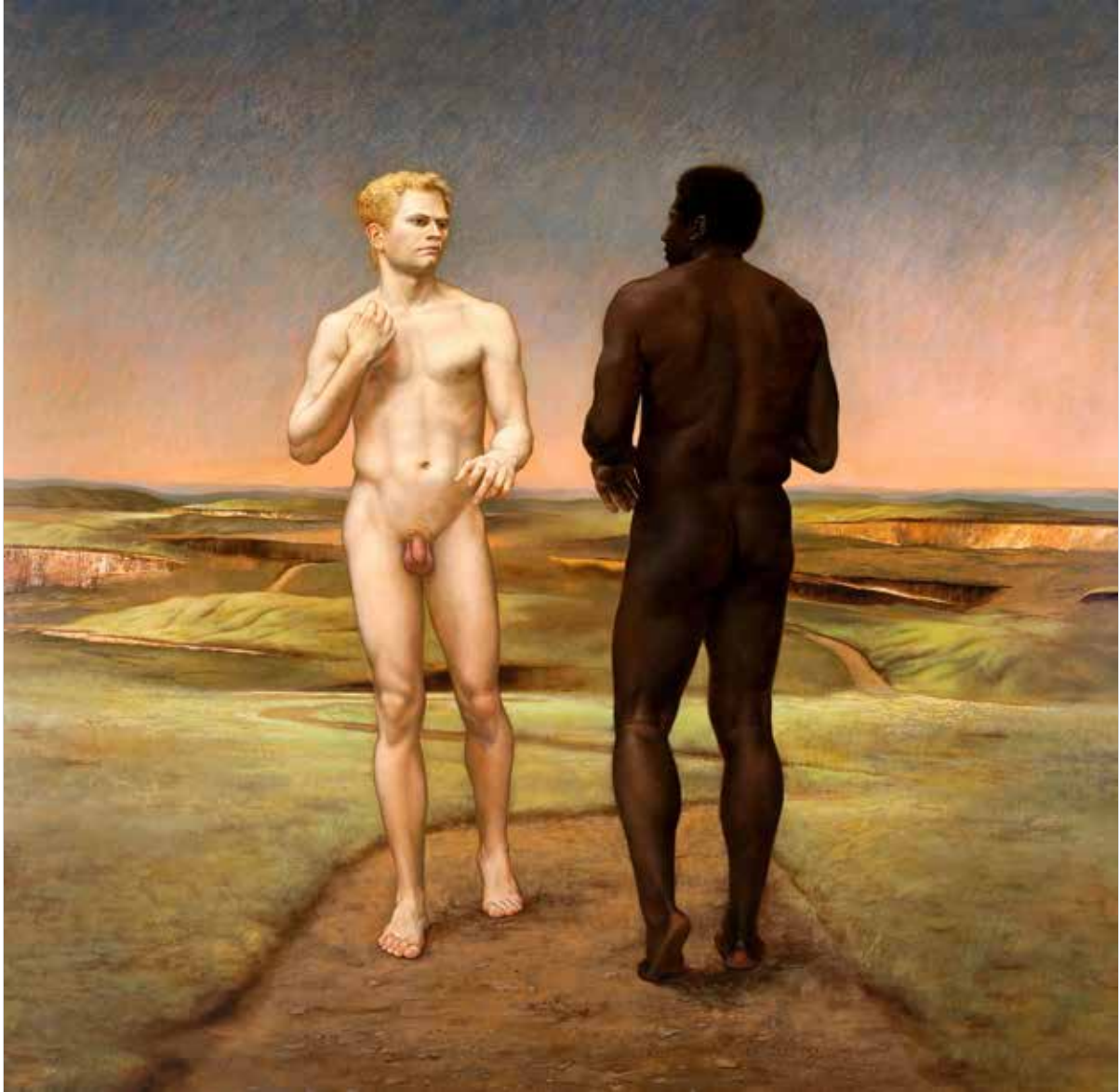
Untitled Study

1998

Oil on paper

Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

In this earlier sketch for *The Path*, distinctive facial features and hair are absent. The overall configuration of the figures and their relationship to the other compositional elements are established here and maintained in the final version.



The Path

1999

Oil on canvas

Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

I claim that without metaphor there can be no inner world, no life of thought, no art.

—Martha Mayer Erlebacher

The Path depicts an imagined place where two male figures meet on a path that winds through a green landscape. Suspended in a moment, the figures gaze at one another as if in a moment of recognition. The men are identically posed, one facing the viewer, the other facing away. Erlebacher was inspired by handbooks for artists of the Italian Renaissance that illustrated front and back views of the same pose. Erlebacher drew these figures from models that were of different body types, one slightly heavier than the other, but “they encounter each other as equals, each walking on the path of life.” Their casual nudity and body language suggest a mythic time and space where, as the artist stated, “we are the same despite superficial differences.”



Untitled Study

1996

Oil on paper

Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

In this painterly sketch for *The Death of Orpheus*, Erlebacher establishes spatial relationships within the composition and contrasts light and dark elements to dramatic effect. A compositional “arch” is formed by the Thracian women who surround Orpheus. He falls to the ground, his body the brightest element in the painting. Transparent swirls of paint suggest that the artist considered draping the women in diaphanous fabric. In the final composition Erlebacher removed the bright flowers that seem to flow from Orpheus’s hair in the direction of his dismembered head.



The Death of Orpheus

1997

Oil on canvas

Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

With this large-scale, ambitious painting, Erlebacher interprets a portion of the myth of Orpheus, a parable of jealousy, violence, and social injustice. Orpheus is most commonly associated with the tragic love story told by Ovid in his epic poem, *The Metamorphoses*, first published in 8 CE. In Ovid's tale, the bard Orpheus and the nymph Eurydice are to marry, but on their wedding day, a venomous snake kills Eurydice. The gods take pity on the grieving Orpheus and let him travel to the underworld to bring her back to the world of the living --on the condition that he not look at her until they have escaped. Near the end of their journey, Orpheus glances backwards, losing Eurydice again as she is pulled back to the underworld. Artists have long

been attracted to Ovid's story because it taps into desires associated with the grieving heart: as much as we would like to, we cannot "bring back" our deceased loved ones.

Erlebacher was attracted to the subsequent part of the Orpheus myth, which had its earliest depictions on red-figure vase paintings. Grief-stricken by the loss of his beloved, Orpheus renounces women and in some versions of the story he takes a male lover. Eventually Orpheus is killed by the women of Thrace, who are angered by the rejection of their love. Here Erlebacher has depicted two stages of his death. At the center of the composition Orpheus is attacked by the enraged women who wield large sticks. Orpheus is unharmed by their weapons so the women cut off his head and throw it into the river Hebros. At the far left in Erlebacher's composition, the head of Orpheus floats on the river and is surrounded by an ethereal glow. In antiquity, a common version of this story ends when Orpheus's singing head is plucked from the river by the women of Lesbos and given a proper burial on their island.



War Game

2010

Oil on canvas

Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

Since the time of ancient Rome, Western artists have created still life images as memento mori, offering a point of meditation on the transitory nature of existence. Artists often used skulls as a recognizable symbol of death and decay. As in many of her paintings, War Game addresses the emotions associated with death through compositional elements that are identifiably contemporary. The skull at the far right is pierced by two bullet holes and spread across the dark green fabric are various bones and bullets.



Figures for *In a Garden*

1976

Graphite on paper

Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

This pencil sketch reveals the manner in which Erlebacher considered her picture plane. Working from each corner of a square piece of paper, she creates a precise geometric pattern, drawing lines at 15-degree angles that overlap and thereby create a flat pattern. The three figures seem all the more sensuous and sculptural by contrast. At the far right of the composition, graphite marks indicate that the artist adjusted the placement of one of the figure's knees.



In a Garden

1976

Oil on canvas

Gift of Frances and Robert Kohler, 2006

Erlebacher explained that the rocky, barren setting inhabited by these three figures is the garden of Gethsemane, the place where Christ prayed on the night of his betrayal by Judas. While her companions lie at her sides, the anguished central figure looks to the heavens. An extended conversation about this painting is transcribed in this catalogue.



Eggplants and Grapes

2010

Oil on canvas

The Bread

2001

Oil on canvas

Erlebacher enjoyed painting still lifes because they offered her the opportunity to show off her virtuosity and dramatic flair. The dark sensuous forms of the eggplant and grapes contrast with the fire-like fabric background. Her strategy is reversed in *The Bread*, where the golden warm form of the gnarled, sculptural bread nestles into the dark background.

Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher



Trompe, Trompe I
(Alabaster) (upper left)
2007
Oil on canvas

Trompe, Trompe II
(Plastic) (upper right)
2008
Oil on canvas

Trompe, Trompe III
(Marble) (lower left)
2009
Oil on canvas

Trompe, Trompe IV
(Wood) (lower right)
2009
Oil on canvas

In these four *Trompe, Trompe* compositions, Erlebacher shows her skill and humor. *Trompe l'oeil* painting is designed to fool the viewer into thinking that the painting's subject is a real, three-dimensional object. Erlebacher called these works "Trompe Trompe" because they refer to two layers of illusion. First, the depicted grapes are illusions of natural grapes. Second, the depictions are further removed from reality because the grapes are objects of alabaster, plastic, marble, and wood. The artist continues to fool the eye by including cracks, blemishes, and realistic-looking nails that appear to project from the surface of the canvas.

Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

CONVERSATION WITH MARTHA MAYER ERLEBACHER

On April 5, 2013, artist Martha Erlebacher met with William Valerio, the Patricia Van Burgh Allison Director and CEO of Woodmere Art Museum, to discuss her work and that of her husband, sculptor Walter Erlebacher (1933–1991). Louis Marinaro joined them. A professor at the University of Michigan’s Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design, Marinaro was Walter Erlebacher’s student at the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts). The conversation that follows is a transcription of the discussion, with refinements and additions from follow-up communication between Valerio and Martha.

WILLIAM VALERIO: Martha, you told me before that you and Walter came to be figurative artists by teaching yourselves human anatomy without a formal course of study offered by any school that instructs in the traditions of figurative art. What was your journey like?

MARTHA ERLEBACHER: For both of us, it came from Walter’s scientific mentality. Walter was a scientist, and at one point he was doing these “geometricized” clay

figures, mashing clay and then creating gestural figures. A friend of ours came over and looked at them and said, “Oh, I see you’re making figures without bones.” And that killed it quick.

WV: Killed it?

ME: Killed it quick! So he said okay, now I’m going straight to the skeleton. He carved a precise, anatomically correct skeleton in lead. This came from a passionate interest in science. He would never go to an academy because they weren’t accurate enough, and they aren’t! None of the academies or academic anatomy books that I know of today would have been accurate enough for Walter.

LOUIS MARINARO: He thought of himself as revolutionary. Rebels are people who don’t actually have a plan. He said many times in class that his intent was to change the way people thought about realism in America. A distinct kind of realism was an American idea, in his mind.

WV: Well, historically, realism has been

a constant in the arts of Philadelphia; Charles Wilson Peale, for example, and then later Thomas Eakins, Robert Henri, the Ashcan School, on into the twentieth century with Walter Stuempfig, Ben Kamihira, and many others. Each of these artists has a different voice, and experiments with varying degrees of stylization, atmosphere, painterly realism, and anatomical figurative precision but—

ME: But for Walter and me it was realism through science. We had to find it our own way.

WV: And is that why you both make reference to the Italian Renaissance? Walter's *ignudi*?

ME: Michelangelo was the best anatomist, period, end of story—he was. [laughs]

WV: There's a scientific quality to Michelangelo that leads to an understanding of the mechanics of anatomy; I know when I look at your paintings or Walter's sculptures, such as his *ignudi*, that you both understand how a finger works. But what about the symbolism of your art? Where did that come from?

ME: That's the \$64,000 question!

WV: Yeah, well, you didn't think I was going to let you off easy!

ME: I think Walter has a much more global, iconic vision than I have ever had. He always wanted to be a recorder of foibles and vicissitudes of mankind, from one end of the spectrum to the other. And it's essentially epitomized in one of his last major works from the late 1970s and 80s, *A Mythic History*—the birth, the growth, the love scene, and the death scene. That's what he really wanted to do, so it wasn't, on his part, an emotional view of humanity. The states of humanity just were. Wouldn't you say that, Lou?

LM: Absolutely, that's well said.

WV: He sought to express universal emotional conditions—what it means to live.

ME: Right, and I was very influenced by him, but my work is much more subjective and emotionally motivated. I'm a gal, after all, come on. Sorry.

WV: Can we talk specifically about the painting here at Woodmere now, *Age of Iron* (2001), in this regard?

ME: *Age of Iron* is about the death of

civilization—what happens a long time after the mythical golden age, which I’ve also taken as the subject of paintings. The age of iron is where we’re stuck at the moment, in my view. And this one, *In a Garden* (1976), the painting purchased by Frances and Robert Kohler and subsequently given to Woodmere, represents the garden of Gethsemane.

WV: Really?

ME: Yes, it’s a painting of despair. I tried at certain moments in my career to make paintings about specific emotional states, relating them to a sense of modern time, but modern time broadly defined. Gethsemane is a place of anguish.

WV: And the place where Christ went to pray, knowing that he would be crucified the next day. So these figures are facing their own mortality.

ME: Yes.

WV: When you describe a “broadly defined” sense of modern times, I know you don’t mean the twenty-first century. But, do you mean from the Renaissance to the present: the ongoing sweep of time that revolves around a

Western humanistic understanding of the universe?

ME: I’ve always looked deeply at the work of artists going back to the Italian Renaissance, not only Renaissance artists, but those who are humanists insofar as they use the human figure to express emotions.

WV: The foreshortening of the two figures in *In a Garden* always reminds me of the foreshortening in Andrea Mantegna’s *Dead Christ* (c. 1480)—it’s such an emotionally gripping illusion of the human body receding dramatically into the space of the painting. There’s also the common element of the active linear drapes.

ME: The strong sense of hard lines is deliberate and so is the awkward view of the figures—the view up the nostrils of the central figure! The figures express anguish. The flanking ones are foreshortened so they look strange. I’ve looked a great deal at Mantegna’s paintings, but I didn’t consciously use them as a quotation. In both *In a Garden* and *Age of Iron*, the world is gone or in the process of going, and these people [in *Age of Iron*] are on the descent.

Various influences come together. At this time, I was very interested in standing stones from Scotland. Cheery, cheery, I know.

WV: The stones are eternal; the human body is not. The twisting and distortion of the figure in *Age of Iron* has always been powerful to me, not only the contorted figure on the ground, but also the large, standing male figure with his arms folded over his head. Recently,

one of the members of the staff here at Woodmere pointed out that the figures in *Age of Iron* are contemporary figures with contemporary haircuts.

ME: Yes, they're to be understood as the people of recent times.

WV: Can I ask about your painting *Self Portrait* (1989) that we have in the collection? I have to ask the question that's often asked by our visitors: why are



Age of Iron by Martha Mayer Erlebacher
(Promised gift of the Erlebacher family)



The Lamentation over the Dead Christ by Andrea Mantegna, circa 1480 (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

your eyes hidden under the hat?

ME: Because the eyes are the window to the soul, and I don't want to reveal too much about myself.

WV: And *The Path* (1999)? You explained to me that the two figures were inspired by Renaissance artists' practice of studying the human figure from front and back, often drawing from the same model, rendering a pose from front and back on the same paper or tableau. Your white figure and your black figure, in this sense, are to be perceived as equals; the same, one viewed from the front, the other from the back. They lock eyes in a moment of recognition.

ME: Yes, that's right. They encounter each other as equals, each walking on the path of life.

WV: Can I ask again, why the fascination with the Renaissance?

ME: The artists of the Italian Renaissance depicted the human body as a vehicle to express everything that mattered spiritually in life. For Walter, looking at and studying Michelangelo provided him with a path to where he wanted to go with his sculpture. For me, it was

Michelangelo too, but also Mantegna, Signorelli, Raphael, da Vinci, Botticelli, Giorgione, Titian, and others—and not just Renaissance artists. I've always been interested in Poussin, Caravaggio, Jacques-Louis David, Géricault, and many artists of our own time who use the figure as a vehicle to explore questions of existence and the beyond. I'm inspired by Woodmere's current exhibition of Violet Oakley's drawings of the United Nations delegates. I'm planning to come back to spend more time with those works. That's a quality exhibition!

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are by Martha Mayer Erlebacher, American, 1937-2013

Preliminary Cartoon for Eight-Figure Composition, 1968

Graphite on paper, 12 x 16 in.
Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

Apollo of W.E. (Walter Erlebacher), 1968

Red pencil on paper, 19 x 13 in.
Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

Apollo, 1971

Oil on canvas, 70 ¼ x 52 in.
Woodmere Art Museum:
Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

Untitled, 1971

Graphite on paper, 17 ½ x 12 in.
Woodmere Art Museum:
Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

In a Garden, 1976

Oil on canvas, 64 x 64 in.
Woodmere Art Museum:
Gift of Frances and Robert Kohler, 2006

Figures for "In a Garden," 1976

Graphite on paper, 16 x 16 in.
Woodmere Art Museum:
Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

Self-Portrait, 1989

Oil on canvas, 17 x 13 in.
Woodmere Art Museum:
Gift of Frances and Robert Kohler, 2004

Untitled Study, 1996

Oil on paper, 16 ½ x 24 ½ in.
Woodmere Art Museum:
Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

The Death of Orpheus, 1997

Oil on canvas, 72 x 108 in.
Woodmere Art Museum:
Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

Untitled Study, 1998

Oil on paper, 13 ½ x 13 ½ in.
Woodmere Art Museum:
Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

The Path, 1999

Oil on canvas, 73 x 72 in.
Woodmere Art Museum:
Promised gift of the Erlebacher Family

The Bread, 2001

Oil on canvas, 20 x 22 in.
Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

Trompe, Trompe I (Alabaster), 2007

Oil on canvas, 13 x 12 in.
Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

Trompe, Trompe II (Plastic), 2008

Oil on canvas, 13 x 12 in.
Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

Trompe, Trompe III (Marble), 2009

Oil on canvas, 13 x 12 in.
Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

Trompe, Trompe IV (Wood), 2009

Oil on canvas, 13 x 12 in.
Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

Eggplants and Grapes, 2010

Oil on canvas, 14 x 16 in.
Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher

War Game, 2010

Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 in.
Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher



This exhibition was supported in part by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

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Photography by Rick Echelmeyer unless otherwise noted. Front cover: *Trompe, Trompe IV (Wood)*, oil on canvas, 2009, by Martha Mayer Erlebacher (Estate of Martha Mayer Erlebacher)

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