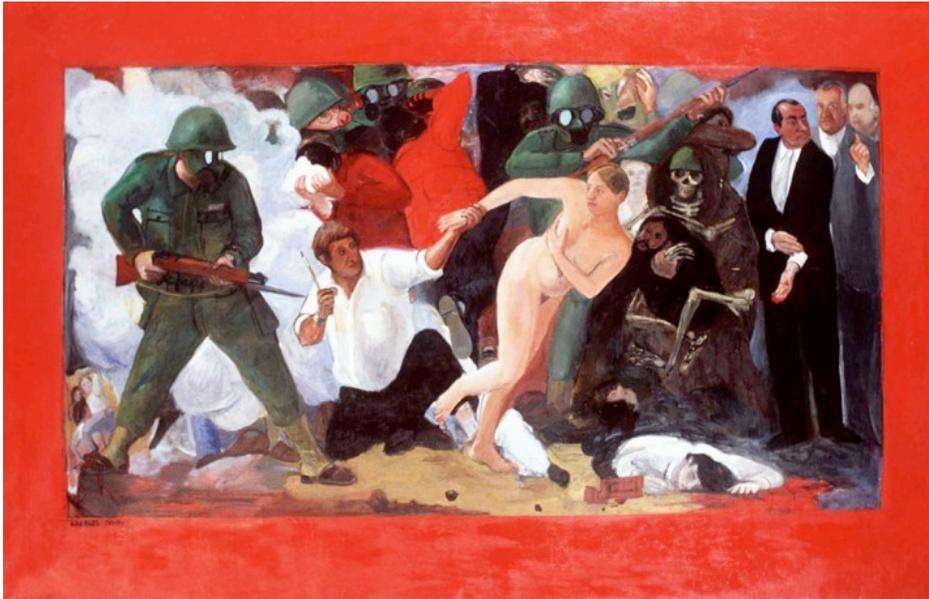


Open ↓

**Paul Georges**

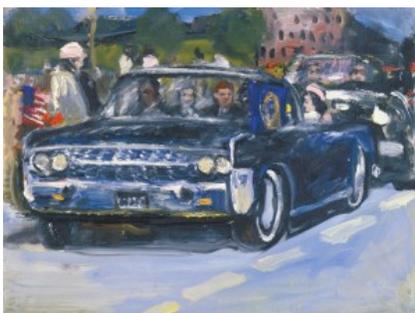
Posted on July 27, 2011 by Raphael Rubinstein



Paul Georges, *My Kent State*, 1970-71, 91 by 142 inches, oil on linen. Copyright 2011 Paul Georges Studio, New York.

As a painter, Paul Georges (1923-2002) worked with brio and fearlessness in every genre he explored: figure painting, self-portraiture, still life, landscape, political allegory. His style, while immediately recognizable, is a marvelous amalgam of painterly French modernism, Rococo exuberance, Northern European brooding and New York street attitude. Georges's achievement in any single of the modes he explored would be enough to make his name; taken as a whole his oeuvre presents a grandness of ambition that few viewers during his lifetime could understand.

Georges emerged in the mid-1950s as one of the New York School artists who sought to bring the energy of Abstract Expressionism to representational painting. Along with Fairfield Porter (who wrote perceptively about his work), Jane Freilicher, Grace Hartigan and Larry Rivers, he infused a gestural approach into figuration, while also engaging traditional painting genres. In the 1960s, however, Georges felt compelled to respond to the social and political turmoil, often in the form of large-scale history paintings, though his first overtly political work was a deceptively modest study of JFK's Dallas motorcade.



Paul Georges, *JF Kennedy Motorcade*, 1964, oil on linen, 24 by 32 inches. Copyright 2011 Paul Georges

When they were first exhibited, Georges's political paintings were often the target of critical attacks from politically conservative critics. His painting *The Mugging of the Muse* (1972-74), an allegory set amid the urban decay of 1970s New York City, was at the center of an unprecedented libel suit. His work was also controversial for its stylistic excess and brash sensuality. In the 1980s, he found permission in the work of younger Neo-Expressionist painters to introduce a rawness into his paintings that is still startling. Perhaps even more striking are his prophetic paintings from the early 1990s that denounce religious

Studio, New York.



Paul Georges, *Liberty and HIV III*, 1989-90, oil on linen, 114 by 96 inches. Copyright 2011 Paul Georges Studio, New York.

extremism against a backdrop of the Twin Towers.

The political content of Paul Georges's paintings is inseparable from his reinterpretations of art history. His highly topical paintings are always steeped in precedent, in the past of his medium. He frequently reworks compositions and motifs from Breughel, Goya, Courbet, Manet and Ensor, with an unmistakable bravura style. And yet, his work never falls into historical pastiche—it is always emphatically of its own moment.

Georges was equally himself when painting gritty responses to AIDS and urban homelessness as he was concocting luxuriant allegories teeming with beautiful women floating naked in Tiepolo skies. Late in his life he divided his time between downtown New York and a farmhouse in Normandy, taking visual inspiration from both places. In *New York, Gefosse, Columbia* he paints a veritable treatise on global politics by simply blending into one canvas images of New York City, the French countryside and a massacre in Latin America.



Paul Georges, *Roses with Vapor Trail Study*, 1996, oil on linen, 59 by 40 inches. Copyright 2011 Paul Georges Studio, New York.

Among his Normandy works are a series of paintings in which vapor trails shoot cross blue skies above dense rose bushes—I can't imagine a better late-20th-century version of the pastoral.

There have been almost no opportunities to see Georges's paintings in recent years. Some older viewers have been hampered by a narrow, biased sense of his work; younger viewers are simply unaware of it. It's my feeling that when Georges's work finally does emerge as a whole he will be recognized as a significant figure in postwar American painting, and, as so many times before, history will have to be rewritten.