

The Love and Art of Irene and Peter Stern

The artist couple shared creativity and mutual devotion reflecting a period of light and joy that came after considerable darkness in their early lives.

by John Seed
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Irene and Peter with Peter's sculpture in front of the GTE building, Santa Monica, California, 1973 (photo courtesy the estate of Irene and Peter Stern)

The artists Irene Monat Stern (1932–2010) and Jan Peter Stern (1926–2004) were a married couple whose works express their love, optimism, and joy of life. In the joint exhibition *Irene Monat Stern and Jan Peter Stern: Lyrical Modernism*, on view through May 21 at Hollis Taggart Gallery's 521 West 26th Street space in

Manhattan, Irene's abstract paintings are reflected in the surfaces of Peter's polished steel sculptures. The Sterns' shared creativity and mutual devotion reflect a period of light and joy that came after considerable darkness in their early lives, especially Irene's. She was a child survivor of the Holocaust.

Born in Lodz, Poland, in 1932, Irene was almost seven when the war broke out. Along with her sister, Annette, and parents, Martin and Pauline, she had multiple close escapes and endured persecution and deprivation. By the end of the war she and Annette were living in an orphanage outside of Warsaw, and eventually reunited with their parents. They were among the very few survivors of a family that had included ten brothers and sisters on her mother's side and seven on her father's. After leaving Poland a few years later, the family moved to Paris, where they struggled to make ends meet while waiting for entry visas to the United States. They arrived in New Jersey in 1953; soon after, Irene's parents managed to purchase two brownstone buildings in New York City's then-run-down Upper West Side.



Installation view of *Irene Monat Stern and Jan Peter Stern: Lyrical Modernism* at Hollis Taggart Gallery (photo by Billy Stern)

Jan Peter Stern, born in 1926, grew up in Berlin. His father, Frederick Martin Stern, was a lawyer and a patron of Herwarth Walden, an art dealer and founder of the famous avant-garde art publication *Der Sturm*. As a result, Peter grew up in a home in which the modern art his father collected commingled with his mother's antique Dutch paintings. Sensitive and artistic, Peter developed early

interests in photography and woodworking. Alarmed by the rise of Hitler, his family left Germany in 1933, moving first to Holland, then to Switzerland, and finally in 1938 to the United States.

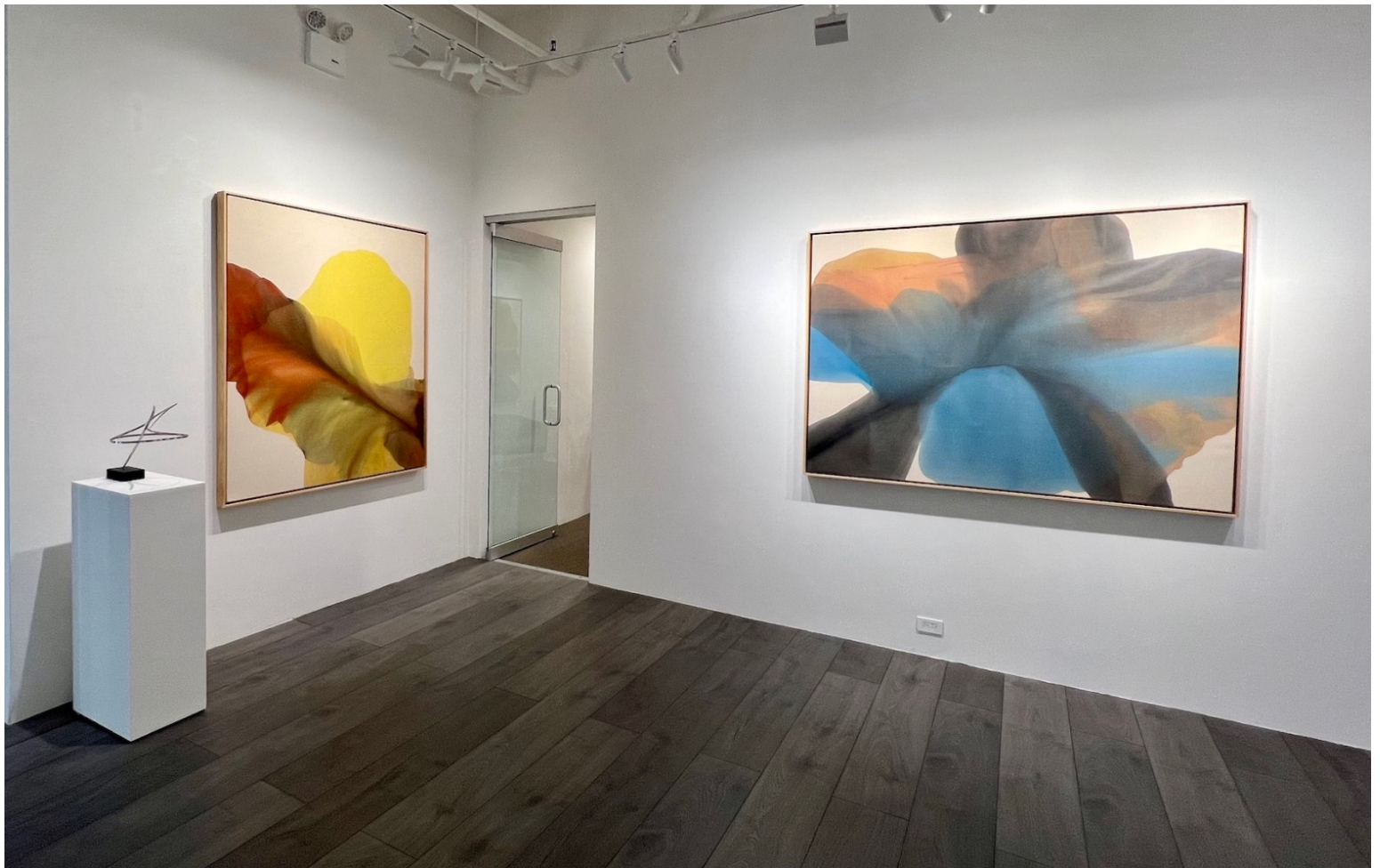


Jan Peter Stern, early 1960s (photo courtesy the estate of Irene and Peter Stern)

While attending high school in New York, Peter was drafted: He served in the Army Counter Intelligence Corps, rounding up German war criminals. After his discharge from the military he enrolled in an industrial design program at Syracuse University and graduated with his MA in 1953. The next year, Peter's mother heard Irene's sister, Annette, speak at ORT (an organization that assisted Jewish refugees), and thought that Annette and her son should meet. They had one date, but it was Irene who soon caught Peter's eye and they were married in 1955.

The newlyweds both took art classes at the progressive New School for Social Research and studied with Manolo Pascual, a modernist/classicist sculptor who had fled the Spanish Civil War. By the time their son Dan was born in 1957, Peter was already working for the industrial design firm Donald Deskey Associates. Peter wanted more time to make sculpture so he asked his boss for some time off. As he later wrote in a personal memoir: "Fortunately, they did not give me one day off and I was fired." Encouraged by Irene he dedicated himself to making sculpture.

Peter garnered a one-man show at the Barone Gallery in 1960 by boldly walking in and introducing himself to the owner. The architect and Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius also took an interest in his work. Peter soon had a studio near the studio of Jacques Lipchitz in Hastings-on-Hudson and was commissioned to create a 35-foot-tall stylized flame for the Gas Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair. Another major commission was a 50-foot-tall, two-ton stainless steel spire (bell tower) for St. Mary's Church at Second Avenue and 15th Street. Peter also sculpted an abstract, treelike bronze titled "Windward" that nestles into a building at 655 3rd Street, between 41st and 42nd Streets. Both of these sculptures remain in place today in Manhattan.



Installation view of *Irene Monat Stern and Jan Peter Stern: Lyrical Modernism* at Hollis Taggart Gallery (photo by Billy Stern)

In 1965 the Sterns moved to Southern California and purchased a secluded home in Santa Monica Canyon. Irene had taken art classes at the Whitney Museum and MoMA while living in New York, but she did not blossom as an artist until arriving in California. With her young sons now in school she worked in watercolor and then began to develop a series of large abstracts painted with Magna — an early form of acrylic paint — on unprimed canvas. “The older we got,” Dan recalls, “the more time she had for creating art.” Because Magna was solvent based and thus produced strong fumes, Irene wore a paint respirator while working and kept her sons out of the studio. She achieved subtle and unexpected effects, generating imagery that was inspired by the natural surroundings of her new home. In Peter’s words: “Irene devised her very own vocabulary of visual expression and her own ways of physically achieving these results in an amazingly spontaneous, yet controlled way.”



Irene in her studio, 1970 (photo by Jan Peter Stern)

Peter was also very productive in California, executing numerous large outdoor pieces. He enjoyed creating works for outdoor settings and thought of sculpture as something that needed to be experienced sequentially: “One walks about it, feels the vibrations of the wind, observes the changes produced by shifting sun and clouds.” A monumental group of gracefully curving steel sheets was originally installed in Century City, Los Angeles, and later donated to Cal State Northridge.

Put into storage after the 1994 Northridge earthquake damaged surrounding buildings, it was re-installed in 2019 near the Fine Arts Complex. Other notable works still on display in California include his curvilinear “Limits of Horizon” in the San Francisco’s Embarcadero Center and his elegant 1974 “Untitled (Cubed Square),” which rises on a slab above a fountain at the Los Angeles Mall.

During the 1970s and early '80s Peter and Irene both participated in solo and group exhibitions, but they also showed as a couple in Honolulu (1974), Santa Monica (1979), and New York (1983). After Peter was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in the early 1980s Irene gradually stepped away from art making to care for him. She found caring for her husband fulfilling and saw it as a season of life. “They fully supported each other,” says their son Dan. Their son Billy adds, “They lived a dance of art and love.”



Peter and Irene sit above the anodized aluminum screen panels of Peter's "Relief Sculpture V," a nearly nine-foot sculpture commissioned by Alcoa for their Chicago office, 1968 (photo by Richard Gross)