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Scene It All

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Frank Fournier for The Chronicle Review

A radical democrat persists in an elitist art world.

He's 85 but doggedly does regular rounds of the New York galleries, and shows up at more artists' openings than an ambitious young tyro who's just moved to town from Kansas. He dresses like central casting would costume an academic—tie and sweater vest under a tweed jacket—and exudes, yes, an avuncular charm.

Back in the early 1950s, though, when Irving Sandler entered the art world, he was an impoverished, edgy, earnest, passionate, 25-year-old bohemian who desperately wanted in on a scene whose centerpieces were the artists who would eventually become world-famous Abstract Expressionists—Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, and others. Sandler learned about their art not in the traditional academic way, by reading about it (very little had been written about their art at the time), but by hanging out with the artists in their studios and gathering places around 10th Street, in Lower Manhattan.

These artists shared not so much a style (Pollock “dripped” skeins of paint, Rothko brushed fuzzy

rectangular clouds of color, and Kline limited himself to wide swaths of black and white) as a conviction that art needed to come from “inner necessity” and contain, however abstractly manifested, their innermost angst. The Great Depression, World War II, and the dropping of the atomic bomb had led them into a deep pessimism. (Their philosophy of choice was existentialism.)

Understandably, the artists who hovered around 10th Street were uninterested in continuing any of the styles that ruled before and during the war—for example, the “American scene” stylized realism of Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, or the School of Paris's neat and clean abstraction derived from synthetic Cubism. To them, the middle-class American public, with its taste for middlebrow art (it was just catching on to School of Paris aesthetics), was the enemy. Due as much to social choice as economic circumstance, the Abstract Expressionists' art world was small and hermetic.

Sandler discovered this art world almost by chance. At 17, during World War II, he left his Philadelphia home to join the Marines. For the next three and a half years, he trained for an American invasion of Japan that never materialized. Honorably discharged in 1946, he finished his B.A. at Temple University (he'd already picked up four semesters of credit, courtesy of the Marines, at Franklin and Marshall College) and then got a master's degree in American history at the University of Pennsylvania. From there, he entered a graduate program in American history at Columbia. His heart wasn't in it, however, so he withdrew before earning his doctorate. (Long after he'd become prominent, Sandler earned a Ph.D. in art history at New York University.)

At this point, he was a man with half of an advanced



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The art critic Irving Sandler at The Proposition, a gallery in Manhattan.

degree in a field that didn't interest him, with no vocation in sight. Sandler says he knew only that whatever he ended up doing, it wouldn't involve a 9-to-5 job.

"When a person is prepared to receive

something, a series of accidents takes place," he muses.

The first of those accidents happened to Sandler in 1952, while he was still a student at Columbia. Dirt poor, he took advantage of every freebie that came his way—including a Museum of Modern Art pass left to him by his first wife when they got divorced. He used it to go sit in the museum garden, or grab a cup of coffee, looking only indifferently at the art. One day, while strolling without purpose through one of the galleries, he was "dumbstruck" (his word) by the sight of a 1950 abstraction by Kline called "Chief." He describes the fateful encounter in his wonderful memoir, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists: A Memoir* (Thames & Hudson, 2003):

"It was the first work of art that I really saw, and it changed my life, something like Saul jumping into Paul, as Elaine de Kooning wrote of Kline's own leap from figuration to abstraction. My conversion was less dramatic, of course, but my life would never be the same. Or, put another way, 'Chief' began my life-in-art, the life that has really counted for me."

In spite of knowing nothing about Kline or the "New York School" (at the time, an alternative term for Abstract Expressionism), Sandler was viscerally drawn to the painting; its raw, splashy, black-and-white energy, its very incomprehensibility, moved him. More "accidents" followed. He befriended a living, breathing second-generation Abstract Expressionist painter, Angelo Ippolito, during a summer in Provincetown; this was followed by rubbing shoulders with a few avant-garde poets. Finally, one night at the Abstract Expressionists' legendary watering hole, the Cedar Tavern on University Place, he found himself seated across the table from Franz Kline himself. Sandler was too shy to say anything much, but he was hooked.

During the day, Sandler started visiting artists' studios, studying what they were up to, and trying to figure out what, exactly, their art meant. At night he became a regular at the Cedar Tavern. There, fueled by alcohol and tobacco, everyone argued fiercely about the same things Sandler was puzzled about. At about the same time, he started attending contentious panel discussions about the new art (the artists disagreed with one another as vociferously as they did with the public) and organizing such discussions himself. Simultaneously he lucked into a lowly job—but a job nevertheless—at a tiny artist co-op, the Tanager Gallery, where many of the Abstract Expressionists exhibited. (The artist members of the gallery humorously dubbed him their "manager," but in reality he was just a receptionist who worked his tail off trying to drag people to the gallery to see the art.)

None of this made Sandler any more money than the artists were earning, and he remained a brother in poverty. He then decided to do what no one else was doing—track what the artists were making, doing, and saying. He began taking copious notes everywhere he went, typing them up at the end of each day. "He's our Boswell," the painter Al Held remarked later on. (The Getty Research Institute, in California, agrees. Most of Sandler's notes now reside in its archives, with Sandler holding onto only those few he needs for his current work. Eventually, those, too, will go the Getty.)

When Sandler first put his foot into the art world, there were only 16 serious contemporary galleries in New York, eight uptown and eight downtown. According to Sandler's estimate, about 250 artists identified with Abstract Expressionism, and of those, 15 or so are regarded as significant today. But only the rare sympathetic critic or adventuresome collector actually spent money on the group's art. Mostly, the artists lived off day jobs that paid a dollar an hour and earned them barely enough to pay for the essentials—studio rent, art supplies, food, and, of course, booze and cigarettes. If and when fame came, it was late and grudging. By the time he had his first solo gallery exhibition, de Kooning was almost 44 years old.

Today, of course, New York is home to thousands of artists, about 600 galleries, a raft of museums devoted to modern and contemporary art, and

armies of collectors. New art forms—huge-format color photography, installation art, video, elaborate conceptualism, and performance art—have diminished formerly dominant painting and sculpture to mere niche media among many. The grungy, bohemian art milieu Sandler bravely embraced almost 60 years ago has long since disappeared, replaced by a glitzy, moneyed, globalized art world where it's no surprise to see artists from “hot” M.F.A. programs having one-person shows while still in their 20s—and selling them out at five figures per work.

You'd think an art world like that would drive a person with Sandler's history into a curmudgeonly redoubt. But with the hugest of grins, Sandler says, “I love the art world.” That's why he still trudges to shows and openings, looks at freshly minted art, and talks to young artists. It's a receptive outlook that sets him apart from critics and art historians 20 or more years younger, who wax nostalgic about how tough and rigorous they think it was back in the mid-70s.

Because of Sandler's radical openness to new art—a principled aesthetic based on being democratic and outward looking, rather than elitist and exclusionary—he finds it easy to look past the art world's underbelly. The business and market side, where ego-driven artists, dealers, critics, and collectors continuously jockey for the best position, doesn't get in his way. He cares only about figuring out what's significant in up-and-coming art. Lacking even a trace of cynicism, Sandler believes that it's the nature of art for there always to be something genuinely new and fresh up ahead; the hard part is figuring out what that is.

When I asked Sandler point-blank if he thinks there are any artists out there in their 30s or 40s who have a shot at being as significant as one of the Abstract Expressionists, he paused before answering. “This is an entirely different age from back then. It's impossible in our postmodern era for anyone to be original—for anybody to do what Jackson Pollock did.” Then he listed a number of young and midcareer artists he thinks are “awfully good”—starting with Tara Donovan and Paul McCarthy, and moving on to Tim Hawkinson, Robert Gober, Dana Schutz, and Tamy Ben-Tor. All of them are slightly edgy; only Tara Donovan makes what is obviously handsome art.

Unlike many art critics with broad knowledge and a deep historical rudder, Sandler resists judgment. In fact, he is deeply suspicious of it. He puzzles over the relevance of an artist's work to the times, its cohesion with the zeitgeist (a word Sandler uses a lot). Unlike most of us who look at art casually, he doesn't begin with “good, bad, better, best.” To Sandler, the biggest mistake we make in looking at art is judging it prematurely. The late, great critic Clement Greenberg, by contrast, was infamous for visiting artists in their studios and telling them exactly how they could improve their art, advising them what to do next.

Sandler, on the other hand, has never been interested in pushing art one way or another. He claims his role is “participant” and “witness.” Actually, he's not so much the art world's Boswell as its Walt Whitman—a calm observer in the moiling thick of things, embracing every aspect of his subject with equanimity. Sandler says he approaches a work of art with the simple question, “Why would anyone want to do that?”

Back in the Abstract Expressionists' day, Sandler says, everyone partook in polemics: They vigorously took sides, debating which art was most significant, which artists were good, which were mediocre, which the best, which philosophical positions—“action painting,” “non-objective art,” “formalism,” “purity,” etc.—were the most valid. The artists believed deeply in their art and, in spite of their separation from mainstream culture, that it mattered, that seeing it and comprehending it could make a difference in people's lives. That contrasts starkly with today's artists, who generally tolerate all kinds of art (“pluralism” is the ism that, over the last couple of artistic generations, has buried all other isms) and remain politely indifferent to it if they think that it's bad. Today's art conversations lack the philosophical heat of conversations back then, and are less concerned with who's aesthetically right and who's wrong than with who's hot in the market and who's passé.

Sandler believes the decline in polemics—angry and bitter though they frequently were—translates into a lack of conviction in today's art. Having observed art for more than 60 years, he's convinced that without some kind of impassioned talk about art—even if it's full of delusion—there's nothing to spur on deep artistic visions. The Club, formed in 1949, had been

the major forum for the polemics of the Abstract Expressionists. Moving from place to place—often the studios of downtown artists—the Club was what Sandler likens to a “floating crap game.” It was where New York School artists hung out, talked about art, and held their passionate panel discussions.

By the late 50s, however, Abstract Expressionism had earned itself some recognition by the wider public (the federal government even sponsored an Abstract Expressionist exhibition that toured Europe, to demonstrate what creativity was possible in our democracy, as opposed to the repression in the Soviet bloc), and the Club lost momentum. Sandler took it over in 1957, trying for five years to keep it alive, but it finally closed in 1962. During those same five years, Sandler tried his hand at being a regular critic for Tom Hess’s then magazine of record in the art world, *ARTnews*, but gave that up, too, in 1962.

That demi-decade also saw the sudden success of Pop Art, whose ironic use of ready-made lowbrow imagery mocked the pained seriousness that Abstract Expressionism stood for, and the beginnings of Minimalism, whose untouched-by-human-hands industrial look did the same thing, only without the irony. Sandler had to make a crucial decision. Would he remain loyal to the Abstract Expressionists, who hated the new art and whose own art had changed his life, or give the likes of Frank Stella (whose maddeningly cool, black-and-white stripe paintings Sandler loathed at first), Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and even Andy Warhol the benefit of the doubt and follow the trail of the new art, wherever it led? Concluding that the thrust of history trumped the bonds of sentiment, Sandler opened himself to the new art.

But Sandler well knew that a danger lay in being so open to new developments: becoming a passenger on every passing bandwagon. His solution has been to try to incorporate what he sees and what he feels into the long view, to reconcile it with recent art history. He began writing books instead of reviews and, over the course of a quarter-century, contributed a four-volume history of (mostly) American art since World War II: *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (Harper & Row, 1970), *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*

(Harper & Row, 1978), *American Art of the 1960s* (Harper Collins, 1988), and *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (Basic Books, 1996). Aside from their erudition and eyewitness immediacy, Sandler’s books boast a clear, relaxed, and readable style. (Sandler credits the “brilliant and brutal editing” of his wife of 52 years, Lucy Freeman, a renowned medievalist art historian, for forcing him into clear thinking.)

Forty years of his essays were anthologized in *From Avant-Garde to Pluralism: An On-The-Spot History* (Hard Press Editions, 2006), and Sandler continues to produce insightful monographs and catalog essays on such artists as his old friends Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein, Al Held, Mark di Suvero, and a recent MacArthur Fellow, sculptor Judy Pfaff. Currently, Sandler is working on another book, a sequel to his encyclopedic yet self-effacing memoir, in which he offers intriguingly personal accounts of the artists, critics, and hangers-on in the art world, from Abstract Expressionism through the go-go-market of the 1980s. It’s called “Act Two: An Art Critic in the Postmodern Era.” “I’m desperately trying to get it done before I go belly up,” he says cheerfully.

Sandler’s teaching career began at the Pratt Institute, for a semester, and then he moved on to New York University and finally to the State University of New York campus in Purchase, where he retired as a professor emeritus in 1997. Yet teaching, researching, and writing have never been enough for the endlessly curious and always-in-motion Sandler. He still wants to be a player—a conscientious, ethical one—in the often down-and-dirty art world he writes about. He’s curated and co-curated dozens of consequential exhibitions, and even briefly directed a modern-art museum (the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase). He co-founded Artists Space, the nonprofit venue whose 1989 exhibition about AIDS—called “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing” (curated by Nan Goldin, with a catalog essay by the controversial gay activist and artist David Wojnarowicz)—became an epicenter in the culture wars. Today, Sandler still participates in Artists Space activities, as well as sits on the boards and committees of an array of other arts organizations whose aggregate purpose is to help good artists get their work shown.

In an April 2004 *Artforum* review of *A Sweeper-Up*, the dean of the Yale School of Art, Robert Storr, observed: “No one has seen more exhibitions in New York galleries or sat on, or in on, as many panels for as many years. Nor has anyone more scrupulously set down what people said in such forums, at openings, or in intimate studio or bar conversations than Sandler. Name a painter, sculptor, curator, critic, or idea man or woman and he will have talked to them and made notes.”

There’s an affectionate art-world joke that there are really five Irving Sandler—an original and four clones. But Sandler insists, “There’s not much to know about me other than I like meeting artists and I like yakking.”

For all of this, Sandler has his detractors. Some say that since he completed that four-volume history, he’s essentially been recycling old material, especially tales of the Abstract Expressionists that he unabashedly refers to as “my guys.” The philosopher and art critic David Carrier charged Sandler with failing to follow Fredric Jameson’s injunction to obey the “radical historicity of everything,” resulting in ideas that are “sadly academic.”

But Sandler’s approach is, in fact, the opposite of academic. While “radical historicity”—the principle that people and events can be understood only by looking through the lens of their historical moment—may be an imperative for many, if not most academics, for Sandler, that lens gets in the way. His imperative is to engulf himself in the intense heat of history by becoming one of the players on the field. His narratives follow the almost forgotten model created by ancient historians, where history is a story worth telling only when the historian has the passionate prejudice of knowing the subject from the inside, as a participant. Sandler tells what he saw happen, when he saw it happen, and what the reactions of people around him were when it happened.

In choosing which artists to chronicle and which to omit, Sandler insists his guide has always been consensus, defined by who most of the serious people on the scene at the time have thought were the best artists. With the Abstract Expressionists, of course, consensus was fairly easy to determine. In spite of their polemical differences, and because there was no big

market to skew verdicts of quality, that small art world agreed on who were the significant artists within it. But as the decades passed, finding consensus became more difficult. During the 1980s and 90s, when interest in contemporary art became chic and artists learned to play the publicity game, there was a shift—and split—in determining who was worth including in recent-history books. Such artists as David Salle and Jeff Koons were thought by some people to be profoundly original, and by others to be merely trendy and superficial. Since the new millennium, things have been skewed again by the power of collectors who buy enough work to open their own “boutique” museums, and by the clout of such international dealers as Larry Gagosian, the glare of whose gargantuan galleries and spectacularly staged exhibitions can blind chroniclers to the significance of the art itself.

In the face of such complications, Sandler goes about his self-appointed job, trusting that most art of real quality will rise to the top; and besides, what rises to the top is beyond anyone’s control. And he accepts with equanimity that much good art, especially nowadays, will not make it into the history books. His lack of intellectual vanity is the perfect counter to the current art-world hype, market machinations, overproductions, and frantic one-stop shopping of art fairs (just about every major city now sponsors at least one of these four-day frenzies each year). Unlike practically everyone else in the art scene, Sandler doesn’t have the slightest inclination to show off. “Early in my life,” he writes in *A Sweeper-Up*, “I had come to believe that I was not as clever as some other kids who were my friends. And yet I knew even then that I wanted to do something of an intellectual nature, and excel at it. I also realized that if I was going to succeed at all, it would be through hard work.”

That, he has doubtlessly done. Curiously, the man who has chronicled all the significant American artists and art movements from the 1950s to the present has never until now himself been chronicled. Perhaps this modest essay could become a goad for the book that needs to be written on Irving Sandler, our art world’s Herodotus, Livy, and Thucydides all rolled into one.

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