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Robert Fishko, *Director*

IVAN LE LORRAINE ALBRIGHT

(1897 — 1983)

After the Race, 1938

oil on canvas in artist's frame

36 x 20 inches

artist's frame: 46 5/8 x 30 5/8 x 2 1/4 in.

signed bottom left: "*Ivan Le Lorraine Albright*"



Provenance

The Artist

Associated American Artists, New York

Dr. & Mrs. Joseph Kaufman, Illinois

Richard L. Feigen & Co., New York & Chicago

Private Collection, New South Wales, Australia

(acquired directly from the above)

Exhibited

Ivan Albright: Magic Realist

Traveling Exhibition:

The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, February 20 — May 11, 1997

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, June 10 — September 7, 1997

Literature

Donnell, Courtney Graham. *Ivan Albright*, with contributions by Susan S. Weininger and Robert Cozzolino, edited by Susan R. Rossen with foreword by James N. Wood, The Art Institute of Chicago, Hudson Hills Press, New York, 1997, pg. 120, pl. 32, Illustrated.

Note

"The spectacular frame dates from the nineteenth century and was decorated with silver paint and embellished with bits of mirror by the artist. Most of Albright's works retain their original frames, many of which he refurbished and embellished, custom designed, and/or carved himself." - Excerpt from above, pg. 120

Essay

The paintings of Ivan Albright are among the most thematically elusive and aesthetically haunting of 1930s and 40s America. The decade prior had largely been colored by the Precisionists who, influenced by the work of the French Purists, tempered the Cubism of the early 1910s to reflect or disparage the gains of urban capitalism. The late 1940s and 50s saw the advent of pure abstraction propelled by a cadre of “action painters” who, at the onset of the existential, nuclear age, communicated an internal ethos rather than the external world. In between was 1930s America, a post market collapse decade in which figuration returned to art in a variety of informally related approaches rebuking both European and homegrown Modernism. The disenchantment with the American success story was focal to Social, Romantic, and finally to Magic Realism, which, in the portraits of Ivan Albright, found a morbid apotheosis to a cheerless decade.

Born just outside of Chicago, as a youth Ivan Albright was given visual and academic access to the world of art by his father, Adam Emory, himself an artist who had studied under Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Father taught son to draw, exposed him to the treasures of Chicago’s Art Institute, and took him on extended vacations to artist communities in the Northeast. Furthermore, Ivan’s middle name *Lorraine* was given to him after the French landscapist Claude Lorrain, while his older brother Lisle Murillo was named after the Spanish Baroque painter Bartolomé Murillo and his twin brother Malvin Marr after the Wisconsin artist Carl von Marr, so admired by his father. Only in 1950 after discovering that Claude Lorrain’s surname had no final letter “e” did Ivan stop signing his paintings *Le Lorraine*.

After serving in WWI, Albright enrolled at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. In 1922, a year prior to graduating, he completed his portrait *The Philosopher*, a work inspired by Édouard Manet and in its formal elements exhibiting the compelling technical prowess of the young artist. Moreover, it marked the beginning of Albright’s artistic introspection, his relentless reflective pondering, thereafter assiduously recorded in notes and sketchbooks which he kept for the rest of his life. This activity guided Albright to his mature, signature style as early as the mid-1920s. He painted *I Walk To and Fro Through Civilization* in 1927, *I Talk as I Walk and Smaller than Tears Are the Little Blue Flowers* in 1928, and by 1929 he had completed one of his masterpieces, *Fleeting Time, Thou Hast Left Me Old*. From July to October, 1931, fourteen of Albright’s works were exhibited at Chicago’s Art Institute. His career was launched.

Albright ascribed the allegorical, abstruse titles to his paintings only after having completed them, usually weighing a number of rhetorical options before selecting one. As complex as his imagery and more poetic than descriptive, the titles engross the viewer in the contemplation of the artist’s most prevailing themes: life, death and particularly the ill effects of time on life’s voyage towards death, which, for Albright, seemed to lay bare the mysteries and conundrums of existence. Conspicuous in his work and culminating in his 1943-44 *Picture of Dorian Gray*, is physical human deterioration. The human body and its facial elements are handled with dark, lugubrious colors to render a labyrinth of rumpled flesh, optically inescapable for its lurid yet beguiling truth.

The artist’s 1938 painting *After the Race* comprises another of Albright’s mystiques, namely that of framing his own canvases. While often carving his own molds, Albright periodically used old wooden ones which he refurbished and to which he added carvings. A frame might integrate the canvas’ aesthetic, complement its narrative, or as with his sketchbooks, merely nurse along his inventiveness. The frame Albright made for *After the Race* is particularly impressive. He embellished it with silver paint whose color values are picked up in the argent blemishes about the muscly legs, arms, shoulders, and breasts of the female figure depicted. Rather than a frame which is merely complementary to the composition, the sense here is that painting and molding are inseparable and bear some recondite relationship to each other. Albright also embedded into

the frame pieces of mirror, suggestive of the bygone craft of inlaying glass in molds so as to evoke in the viewer a spirit of self-reflection. Writing about the cryptic canvas, art historian Courtney Graham Donnell proposed the following:

“Thinly painted in an eerie palette of grays and ochers, with accents of pink and red, this image of an large-bodied, young woman, caught in a reflective moment, emerges like an apparition from a dark surround {...} Given the artist’s penchant for metaphoric titles, he may have meant to suggest that this athletic figure, partially covered by what appears to be a loosened bathing suit or towel, has run a foot or swimming race, either literally or figuratively.” (Donnell, Courtney Graham, Ivan Albright, Hudson Hills Press, New York, 1997, p. 120)

In the 1950s and 1960s Albright spent much time at his wife’s ranch in Dubois, Wyoming. Rather than painting vast spaces and dramatic skies, he focused on tightly rendered studio still-lives that ingeniously incorporated elements of the Old, Wild West in a style surely influenced by the historic American trompe l’oeil paintings of William Harnett and John Frederick Peto. Works such as *The Wild Bunch* (1950-1951) and *The Rustlers* (1959-62) are, in fact, so replete with inescapably mesmerizing details that they appear to verge on the abstract. They invoke the all-over skeins of a Jackson Pollock canvas or the microscopic Art Brut iterations of French artist Jean Dubuffet, who wrote catalog commentaries for Albright’s 1964-65 traveling museum retrospective (The Art Institute, Chicago, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York). Albright spent his final years in Woodstock, Vermont, working right up to the end of his life in 1983. On the 100th anniversary of the artist’s birth, in 1997 The Art Institute organized a second retrospective, this time traveling to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.