

Die Welt (The World)

Monday November 17, 1997

“PAINTINGS LIKE A HAND OFFERING PEACE”

Sonja Eisenberg returns to Germany after sixty years with an exhibition

– Peter Schmalz

She slowly passes through the gray stone gate. Fall has covered the black gravel paths with a bright carpet of fallen leaves. In the spring of her life she had often played on little Brix Place in New Westend, Berlin. The small lake is banana-shaped just like it always was, and the trees look age-old. Sonja Eisenberg was a little girl, eleven when she and her mother and brother were forced into a last-minute escape from the Nazi hordes. That was sixty years ago. For the first time since that terrible day, which tore out the fabric of a sheltered life, she has returned to the city of her birth. “It’s all so much smaller,” she says. “The trees and the bushes and even the lake loom much larger in my memory.” To the eyes of a child the world is populated by giants.

The child became an artist—a woman who shows her life and feelings in color, much of it in harmonious pastels, but also in the hard, dark shades of grief and rage. Berliner Senator-for-Culture Peter Radunski, who is presiding this evening over the opening of the first German Eisenberg exhibition, is spellbound by the magic of her work: “Her paintings invite us to project our own perceptions, fantasies and feelings and to redefine the world around us.”

His work as senator is bound up in a curious way with the elegant lady artist: his office in Berlin at 188 Brunnen Street was the original home of the enterprise that her father directed with three brothers. For the first third of this century, the “Brothers Weinberger” were the equivalent of the modern Berliner firms Reichelt and Lindner and the food emporium of the Kaufhaus de Welt (the Department Store of the World, Berlin’s largest) all rolled into one: the Weinbergers were the food supply monarchs of Berlin. The Brothers became the premier butter importers of the German Empire, their best products coming from Holland. Hitler’s propagandist Goebbels coined the curse, “Butter-Jew”, and the Nazi organ *Der Stürmer* incited to violence against the Jewish firm.

Sonja and her brother Siegbert two years her senior, sensed none of this agitation — yet. All of that changed dramatically on one day, whose exact date she has forgotten. But which will remain forever branded into her memory. She was friends with a young girl from a noble family —her name was Ingeborg. They met every morning and walked to school together. On that day she waited in vain for Ingeborg, but later she saw her friend. Ingeborg screamed at her: “You filthy Jew! My parents have forbidden me to walk with you anymore.” The Weinbergers were not especially religious, but for the first time Sonja sensed that being Jewish might be something different, something apart. Siegbert and Sonja were transferred into a private Jewish school, “Kaliski”, but they could not always escape the terror on the streets.

“Kill the Jewish pig,” screamed their peers, and attacked them.

One time, when a girl was beating her up, Sonja struck back as hard as she could. Later, the other girl's mother called up the Weinbergers to complain. "When my father heard that I had hit another child, he slapped me." The child Sonja said: "You could at least have asked me why I hit her." "That hurt my father deeply," she recalls. Her father was a kind-hearted man. He had gone to war for Kaiser Wilhelm III, had been wounded three times and often decorated. "He simply could not acknowledge the growing threat." Often he would say: "The Germans won't do that." But they did it nevertheless, and soon Company Weinberger had reached the end of the road.

The Nazis invoked a boycott against the business. Dairies were enjoined from supplying the "Butter Jews". On March 6, 1936 the Berliner Police Commissioner prohibited the successful brothers from "trade in the food business in any form." The firm was shuttered and the owners jailed. The brothers were incarcerated for three months in Moabit Prison to force them to sign over their rights to the business. Their staunch refusal did little: their operations remained closed. Without an income, the Weinbergers lived on their savings for two years, then fled finally to New York. Each member of the family carried ten marks with them. In the new land the father went forth to find work — knowing not one word of English — and found it on the street. A woman's voice called out to him:

"Mr. Weinberger, I know you from Berlin. We need a man like you here."
This was the beginning of a new career.

Sonja wasn't yet 19 when she met the man of her life at a wedding. He was Jack Eisenberg, who, they soon discovered, had lived just around the corner from the Weinbergers in the Kurfurstendamm before he, too, had fled Berlin.

Fate, however, did not loosen its grip. An illness kept the young wife bedridden for years, and her son Ronald, the first of four children, was stricken with leukemia. "Promise me," he said one day, "that you will share with everyone what you have taught me. That way, some day soon, there will be no more war." On the very next day, he died at the age of twelve. His mother pondered this task until the day, some time later, when her nine-year old, Ralph, brought her a box of paints. "I want a picture for my birthday." She painted the pain and grief out of her soul, and was soon recognized from coast to coast as a great talent.

Her paintings have long since been exhibited all around the world, in Paris and Tokyo, in Italy and Amsterdam, in museums and in private collections. But she never returned to Germany. In the meantime she feels she has grown strong enough even for that and has come to regard the ordeals of her life as opportunities: "It's the darkness that gives you the light. Without the night, you wouldn't see the stars in the sky."

In the park she watches for a long time as the yellow leaves swim on the lake. Then she turns away and laughs: with an American passport in her purse she has returned to the place where her childhood was brutally trampled. "I don't feel any pain or rage about the past." Her paintings, now hanging in Berlin, are like a hand, offered in peace and for mutual understanding.

– *Translated by Raoul Cansino*

Arts Magazine

November 1974

SONJA EISENBERG AT COMARA

In her first one woman show in Los Angeles, Sonja Eisenberg works in oils and watercolors, creating abstractions that communicate more than the average realist painting. This is surprising because her work is willfully ambiguous, filled with shifting imagery and generalized themes. She builds up her compositions gradually, letting one brushstroke suggest another, and so on until the painting is finished, thus forging a creative link between all brushstrokes. Her decision involves not only her aesthetic judgment, but also, her unconscious. For people who are sensitive to the language of shapes and colors, Eisenberg's imagery is exceedingly revealing.

The dark seed-like forms that used to move mysteriously over her canvases have now turned into lights that look like flowers or the illuminations on Christmas trees. This festive feeling is sometimes counteracted by melancholy scenes that suggest tombstones buried under ice and snow. Such images change as the viewer examines and meditates. A strange monster, tamed by the artist's soothing colors into graciousness, may suddenly turn into blossom.

Eisenberg's present work shows an advance in her handling of voids which are deeper and more impressive than before. She does this by balancing large areas of atmospheric space and small areas filled with solid volumes. These mysterious volumes, wonderful in their intricacy, seem to be in the process of formation from floating particles and to constitute an effective cosmic approach. (*Comara, October 7-31*)

– *Gordon Brown*

SONJA EISENBERG

Movement within a deep space; subtle, compelling variations of color; and throughout it all, the pull of emotions ranging from deep, contemplative serenity to unbound, angry energy: there is much to be seen in Sonja Eisenberg's work. Hers, in fact, are paintings for today: their range reflects the diversity of sensations and reactions with which we are confronted; and they provide the refreshment we need in order to recover from these constant assaults.

It thus makes perfect sense that hers should be an art of diversity within constancy. Eisenberg does not hesitate to tackle the new: indeed, constant exploration is part of her nature. Better yet, she is incapable of repeating herself. As she reinvents herself with every painting, she offers us ever-fresh images which have the power, in turn, of giving what true art should always give: new strength for our own spirit.

That her technique is dazzling goes without saying: these transparent mists, these vaporous distances, these infinitely subtle shades which appear in her work seem as if nature itself had made them; but then, great art always seems inevitable. We are offered a series of voluptuous pleasures as we look at the wealth of details; and that is as it should be. Other artists might think that, alone, was a sufficient achievement. Eisenberg knows better: even as her work seduces the eye, it speaks to the soul; and that is why it will remain after so much else is forgotten.

– *Olivier Bernier, author and lecturer, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

SONJA EISENBERG

"Works of great vigor, imagination & spontaneity, all of which have been created by the indomitable will of a woman with a demon in her guts, butterflies in her duodenum, a flame in her heart and magic in her hand."

– *Sidney Delevante, artist and teacher at Cooper Union School of Art, Art Students' League and the North Jersey Art Center*

De Typhoon

Wednesday, June 26, 1974

LET'S HAVE A LOOK AT ART

If one wants to talk about abstract or non-figurative art, then this work can very well be taken as a starting point; the subject matter itself—a feeling, a personal experience—is, after all, abstract because it only exists in the thoughts of the painter. Sonja Eisenberg, with a technique which strongly deviates from what one might usually expect is able not only to reproduce these thoughts on paper or on canvass, but she does communicate them in an even stronger way to the spectator. In vaporous colors which imperceptibly melt into each other, and which strike the viewer because of their numerous nuances and shades, she builds up a world of thoughts, which directly takes the onlooker on a flight to unknown distances.

And it continuously seems as if a light looms in the background of the painting, which gives joy, or rather, takes some more gloom away. Sonja Eisenberg's paintings reflect an optimistic look at life, a life which is not without difficulties or problems, but where the difficulties will be overcome.

Whoever has seen Sonja Eisenberg's work and then meets the paint in person comes into contact with a personification of that work. There is a rare and seldom seen complete rapport between the artist and her work. Speaking with her, one discovers that Sonja Eisenberg actually is painting herself: a woman who received enormous blows from life, but who, nevertheless, has never let life discourage her because of that. She has bitten through the sour apples and now is able to communicate to others through her work the joy that she once more has won. The joy which speaks from the paintings also radiates from the painter who was stricken with polyneuritis and then started to paint; who not only had the strength to withstand some heavy blows to her family, but now is even making others happy with her work, like the old gentleman, who was given one of her works exhibited in Amsterdam as a present by a relative, and who could not subdue his tears when he received it. For Sonja Eisenberg, when she told me this, this was without a doubt the high point of her first exhibition in Amsterdam.

– *Jan de Carpenter*

INSIGHTS AND ECHOES

February 24, 1973

The deep intuition that Sonja Eisenberg brings to her oils and watercolors is reinforced by her subtle craft. In the mystic tradition of Blake and Redon, this artist captures the essences of thought and objects that intrigue her sense of creativity. She translates these essences into images, compelling in their aesthetic originality and form. She executes her paintings with extreme awareness for her media—watercolor or oil, finding in the inherent tactile and color qualities the shapes and reflections of her subtlest intuitions.

In her Helix series, influenced probably by the discovery of the Double Helix, this patterning of the basic form of life, the DNA molecule, is ingeniously utilized in varying ways. For instance, in *Antwort*, she visualizes in aesthetic terms, within the helix form, reverberating sound, a pulsating “white” echo. In her four-paneled canvas *Goethe*, Sonja Eisenberg masterfully conveys, through the same basic form, Goethe’s concept of the force of nature moving earth through the seasons, counterclockwise from the warm solstice to the winter solstice, in its diurnal journey through time.

The place is the new Bodley Gallery, 1063 Madison Avenue.

– *Leo Soretsky*

Sarasota Herald Tribune

Thursday, January 24, 1974

*Buyways Gallery, 5255 Ocean Blvd., Siesta Key
presenting oil and watercolor abstract paintings of Sonja Eisenberg.*

There is a lyrical, almost musical quality to the moving shapes and color tones of Sonja Eisenberg’s paintings — a soft, misty feeling of the vastness of earth, sea and sky. Ethereal flowers play against a muted world of water depths, and mother earth lives and breathes in delicate abstraction. These are subtle, sophisticated communications of universal existence — balanced visual poetry capturing the essences of thought, objects, nature, and man.

Pages could be written on the interpretation of these beautiful paintings but would not, in wordy explanation, reveal the very emotional quality of the work — only seeing them will accomplish this.