

## **Irving Kriesberg, Artist of Dreamlike Landscapes, Dies at 90**

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Irving Kriesberg, a much-admired American painter whose work combined the intense colors of Abstract Expressionism with haunting images of human and animal forms, died on Nov. 11 at his home in Manhattan. He was 90.

The cause was complications of Parkinson's disease, his son, Matthias, said.

Where hard-line Abstract Expressionists shunned figural elements in their work, Mr. Kriesberg used them lavishly. As a result, he was often called a Figurative Expressionist; the term applied to midcentury Expressionists whose work was not strictly abstract.

But as often as not, Mr. Kriesberg's work transcended category. Though it teemed with figures — frogs, birds, people, angels and much else — it was anything but representational. Normally small creatures tower and loom, dancers weave through space at unorthodox angles, and customarily static objects appear fluid and sinuous. All these things gave his work a sense of wit and mystery.

A dreamlike symbolism suffuses Mr. Kriesberg's paintings, though the meaning of each symbol seemed known only to him. In "Caution" (1981), a man holding a spear faces off against a huge, looming frog. In "Final Dance" (2002), a white, owl-like angel joins hands with a goat-horned devil. In "Green Dance" (1999), whose lines and colors invoke Matisse, a simian figure in the foreground leads the viewer's eye to a line of vibrant dancers in the background.

Mr. Kriesberg's work, which also includes sculpture, is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Jewish Museum, all in New York, and Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington.

Irving Kriesberg was born in Chicago on March 13, 1919. (The family name is pronounced CREASE-berg.) He received a bachelor of fine arts degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and later earned a master's degree from New York University.

After earning his bachelor's degree, Mr. Kriesberg spent three years in Mexico, becoming deeply influenced by traditional art there, before he settled in New York. He later lived in India and Japan, whose art also informed his work.

Mr. Kriesberg came to wide attention in 1952 with his inclusion in the major exhibition "Fifteen Americans" at the Museum of Modern Art. (The exhibition also included the

Abstract Expressionists Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still.) He was given his first solo exhibition in 1955, at the Curt Valentin Gallery in Manhattan.

Mr. Kriesberg's first marriage, to Ruth Miller, ended in divorce, as did his second, to Barbara Nimri Aziz. He is survived by his third wife, Felice K. Shea, a retired New York State Supreme Court justice; two children from his marriage to Ms. Miller, Hadea Nell Kriesberg of Hillsborough, N.C., and Matthias Kriesberg of New York and San Diego; and a brother, Louis, of Syracuse.

A recipient of Fulbright and Guggenheim Fellowships, Mr. Kriesberg taught variously at Columbia, Yale and the Pratt Institute. He wrote several books, including "Art: The Visual Experience" (Pitman, 1964) and "Working With Color" (Prentice Hall, 1986), reissued in 1992 by Van Nostrand Reinhold.

His other work includes a series of combinatorial canvases — paintings comprising multiple, movable panels that the viewer can swing out and recombine in myriad arrangements.

If Mr. Kriesberg's talent for figural art made him something of an outsider in Expressionist circles, it stood him in fine stead in a world every bit as luminary. In the 1940s, on returning to New York from Mexico, he applied for a job as the lighting designer of the Wondersign, a vast Times Square billboard comprising more than 20,000 electric bulbs. Selectively lighted, they made animated displays of words and pictures.

For his audition, Mr. Kriesberg was asked to conjure an illuminated Frank Sinatra. Mr. Sinatra had to be large, he had to be bright and, above all, he had to be recognizable.

Mr. Kriesberg finished his design, and the switch was thrown. The lights came on, the Times Square crowd roared "Frankie!," and he got the job.