

## **Irving Kriesberg obituary**

### **Brilliant American painter with a vivid palette – and an affection for animals**

**By Michael McNay**

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The exhibition of contemporary painting, 15 Americans, has remained almost as famous in New York since the Museum of Modern Art organized it in 1952 as it has in Europe, where it visited, among other galleries, the Tate. It included a group of painters whose work took Europe by storm – Jackson Pollock, of course, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell (though not, to his anger, Barnett Newman) – and one or two artists who didn't. The smaller group included Irving Kriesberg, who has died aged 90 leaving behind a brilliant body of painting and sculpture.

The disappearance of Kriesberg from the world scene after that exhibition had nothing to do with his ability and a good deal to do with the critic Clement Greenberg's big bang version of art history, with a few selected Americans at the top of the heap – a process which his rival, Harold Rosenberg, summed up acidly: "In this burlesque of art history, artists vanish, and paintings spring from one another with no other generating principle than whatever 'law of development' the critic happens to have on hand." Given the tendency of the contemporary art world to take in only one big thing at a time, the streamlined Greenberg version prevailed and artists without his imprimatur were consigned to outer darkness. Kriesberg was on the outside.

His problem was that he chose to find his own route. Born in Chicago, he studied at the art institute for three years from 1938 and followed up with a master's at New York University. From 1942 to 1946 he studied in Mexico City at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas, drawn not simply by the magnetism of the Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, but also by popular contemporary culture and pre-Columbian art. Composition was one important element he retained from European art particularly, and which the abstract expressionists rejected. Back in the US in the late 40s he chose to settle in New York, where he became the protege of the great emigre cubist sculptor Jacques Lipchitz.

Neither Kriesberg's blazing talent nor his acquired experience helped him to break into the inner circle, for though the abstract expressionists, too, were influenced by European art, particularly surrealism, their fully-fledged work was unquestionably American in size, excitement and gung-ho aspiration. Kriesberg remained a figurative painter, not in itself a bad career move (within the charmed circle, so did De Kooning), but taken with the relatively intimate scale of his easel paintings and the undeniable European influences, he proved unfitted for the role bestowed by Greenberg of all-American genius.

The most striking influence was Matisse. Occasionally there would be a reference to the French master, such as the leaf motifs Matisse used in the windows of the Rosary chapel and in his late *découpages*; too obvious to be anything but a discreet homage. The colour too is open and declamatory, but subtle in a way that many of the post-Matisse colourists missed; Kriesberg's vivid palette may have been influenced too by the visit to India he made on a Fulbright fellowship.

Animals were a motif rather more often than humans: frogs, cats, tortoises, apes with the infinite variations of form they allowed him, though in either case the shape of the canvas came first, the given into which Kriesberg settled all other elements with brilliant clarity of invention. Early in the 50s he produced works each of which consisted of four canvases fixed separately to a metal armature plugged into a rudimentary wooden plinth, like a modern take on a medieval folding polyptych altarpiece. The best of these consisted of two Matissean abstract nudes, pink on black, each split between two canvases; a tour de force. His affection for animals is manifest in the sculptures he made after a visit to Japan in 1985, where he fell in love with potter's clay. He transmuted one heap of wet, sliding clay into an ape in all its shambling apishness, irregularly patched with glaze; another pile of clay becomes a taut, beady-eyed and positively Shakespearean raven.

Most of all, Kriesberg's work evokes lightness, the light that colour brings and lightness of spirit. However he hated the New York art world, he stuck with it, living until his death in Manhattan, writing a couple of books on the use of colour; teaching often, including at Columbia University and Yale; scooping up fellowships and awards by the handful; frequently exhibiting, though almost never abroad, just the touring 15 Americans and a mixed show at the Kumar Gallery in New Delhi in 1966.

He is survived by his third wife, Felice K Shea, a retired judge of the New York state supreme court, and by a daughter and a son from his first marriage, to Ruth Miller.

- Irving Kriesberg, artist, born 13 March 1919; died 11 November 2009