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Irving Kriesberg: Changeable Paintings at Lori Bookstein
by David Cohen

In the 1950s, Irving Kriesberg hit upon a novel hybrid of mediums that arranged four double sided painted or drawn panels on a hooped armature which in turn was sunk into a base: the panels, free of the wall, could be manually rotated, thus presenting sixty-four potential configurations and the added variables of side views and slanted perspectives. Within his individual compositions, Mr. Kriesberg was interested in collage and an abstract figuration. By making mobile sculptures out of these pictures, he very literally took the collage impetus beyond the frame.

Funky as it may sound, his new form was of ancient (or at least medieval) pedigree, recalling High Gothic altarpieces whose multiple panels could expand or contract into different scenes. Mr. Kriesberg's "Roslyn Diary (Altarpiece)" (1967) acknowledged this ancestry: No less than fourteen panels open and close in elaborate orchestrations. (Playing with it recalls the adolescent pleasure of being let loose at the Sir John Soane Museum, London, or the Gustave Morreau studio, Paris, with their ingenious flapping displays).

You'd think from the description that the young artist was in thrall to a gimmick; in fact, the paintings are made in complete earnest, and don't suffer in the least from their off the wall presentation. Besides collage, the artist was clearly exercised by narrative; his panels were a means to force the work of narrative construction upon the viewer. This radical, disjunctive aspect of Mr. Kriesberg's work could deem him a forerunner to minimal and conceptual art. His style, however, belonged increasingly to a very different camp: bestiaries and crucifixions looked to such contemporary European expressionists as Pierre Alechinsky and Graham Sutherland, as well, no doubt, to their forebears, Matthias Grünewald and the Book of Kells.