



52 WALKER ST | MAR 23 – APR 27, 2024

## Si Lewen

Si Lewen, Untitled drawing from *The Parade*, c. 1950. Crayon, ink, paint and graphite on gessoed board, sheet: 12 x 18 inches (30.5 x 45.7 cm).

James Cohan is pleased to present *Si Lewen*, curated by Art Spiegelman, on view at the gallery's 52 Walker Street location from March 23 through April 27, 2024. Polish-born artist Si Lewen (1918-2016) is best known for *The Parade*, an epic cycle of sixty-three black and white drawings that contends with the horrors the artist witnessed during the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945. Lewen served in the United States Army during the Second World War as part of the Ritchie Boys, a specialized force of native German-speaking G.I.s, some of whom were Jewish refugees who immigrated to the US fleeing Nazi persecution. This strikingly modern and profoundly resonant work is presented at James Cohan alongside important works from Lewen's oeuvre dating from the early 1950s to the mid-2000s, the majority of which have not been seen for four decades.

This exhibition marks the first time that the full suite of *The Parade* has been shown in New York, following an exhibition at the Menil Collection in Houston in 2023.

Art Spiegelman writes:

"I found a copy of *The Parade* by Si Lewen about thirty years ago, when I was researching the wordless picture stories that briefly flourished between the two World Wars. They were precursors to today's graphic novels, but unlike the comic books on the lower branches of my medium's family tree, those books were highly admired by intelligent adult readers. Si's work was a late and almost unseen entry in that relatively obscure genre. It was drawn and published in a small edition in 1957, after the genre's heyday, but conceived on World War Two's frontlines. Working with a Modernist vocabulary, *The Parade* is a haunting free-jazz dirge that decries the eternally recurring madness of war. Soon after finding the book, I found the then 94-year-old artist in a Quaker retirement community in Pennsylvania, still alive and dizzyingly prolific. He was a dynamo: a charming and elfin man, frail but bubbling with enthusiasm, wry humor, and unorthodox

opinions. He was working on what was to be his last work: well over a hundred shroud-like canvases, called *Ghosts*. Some of these as well as several other works from his long and varied oeuvre will accompany the full suite of 63 drawings for *The Parade* in this show.

It's the first time this wordless picture story will be publicly exhibited in NYC since forty of them were first seen at the Lotte Jacobi Gallery in 1953. Jacobi, a renowned portrait photographer and photojournalist as well as a gallerist, arranged for the drawings to be shown to her friend, Albert Einstein, who wrote Si a fan letter saying:

*I find your work The Parade very impressive from a purely artistic standpoint. Furthermore, I find it a real merit to counteract the tendencies towards war through the medium of art. Nothing can equal the psychological effect of real art... Our time needs you and your work!*

Si would be proud to find his work seen again in New York City, where he arrived at seventeen as a Polish Jewish refugee and continued to develop as an artist—but Si's ghost would break down weeping to return to a world with a new appetite for authoritarianism and antisemitism and to find rivers of blood flowing in Ukraine and Gaza. It doesn't take a genius to see that our time needs Si and his work now more than ever."

The works on view in the second gallery expand the remarkable field of artistic vision Lewen demonstrated in *The Parade*. *The Grand Feast*, 1964, is a monumental depiction of a wartime banquet, equally resplendent and sinister, which reflects major artistic influences such as the highly stylized silhouettes of Ancient Egyptian figuration, as well as the sharply formal geometry of Modernism. Lewen cited early Renaissance triptychs and the chance juxtaposition of images favored by the Surrealists when discussing his ambitious *Procession* series, which he began in 1960 and continued into 2014, and which mirrors the serial nature of *The Parade*. The *Procession* explores the possibility of a seemingly endless progression of imagery, a "*never-to-be-finished metamorphosis, formed by visions of transfiguration and mutation.*"

The gallery will host a conversation between Art Spiegelman and Dan Nadel, Curator-at-Large for the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, on Saturday, April 6, at 2 PM at 52 Walker Street.

**Si Lewen (1918 - 2016)** grew up in Germany as a Polish Jewish refugee, where he witnessed both the cultural dynamism and political upheaval of the Weimar years. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Lewen fled Berlin at the age of fourteen years old – first to France and later to the United States. Lewen resumed the art studies he had begun in Europe prior to the war, enrolling at the National Academy Museum and School of Fine Arts in New York in 1935. Lewen served in the United States Army during the Second World War. He saw action in Normandy and witnessed the horrors of Buchenwald in 1945, just as the camp was liberated. In 1946 Lewen attended the Art Students League of New York, made possible by the G.I. Bill. Exhibitions of Lewen's work have been held at the Roko Gallery, NY, Lotte Jacobi Gallery, NY the New School, NY, the Museum of Modern Art, NY, the University of Miami, FL, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, NY among others. In 2009, Lewen was named Chevalier in the French Legion of Honor for his contribution to the liberation of France. His work is held in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, among others.

**Art Spiegelman (b. Stockholm, 1948)** was the first comics artist to win the Pulitzer Prize, which he received for his groundbreaking Holocaust narrative, *Maus*. He studied art and philosophy at Harpur College before joining the underground comics movement in the 1960s. Spiegelman taught history and the aesthetics of comics at the School of Visual Arts in New York from 1979 to 1986, and in 1980 he founded RAW, the acclaimed avant-garde comics magazine, with his wife, Françoise Mouly. Honors Spiegelman has received include induction into the Will Eisner Hall of Fame and the Art Director's Club Hall of Fame. In 2005, he was named one of Time magazine's 100 Most Influential People. He was made an Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2007, and in 2011 he was awarded the Grand Prix at the Angoulême International Comics Festival. In 2015, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 2018 he became the first comic artist to receive the Edward MacDowell Medal. His work has been exhibited at museums throughout the world, including the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Jewish Museum in New York City, and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

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