



*Albert York: Three Red Tulips in  
a Landscape with Horse and Rider, 1982,  
oil on wood, 15<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> by 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches.*



# The Idylls of Albert York

*Standing apart from the art scene and producing at his own pace, this Long Island artist has nonetheless gained an audience for his small landscapes and still lifes. Below, a meditation on his singular oeuvre.*

**BY BILL BERKSON**

Until recently, Albert York has been a painters' secret, written and talked about by painters and a choice band of avid connoisseurs. He began showing in the early '60s. The importance of his work and a critical vocabulary for it were established promptly in brief essays by two painter-critics, first Lawrence Campbell and then Fairfield Porter. Porter, who befriended York in the mid-'70s, wrote: "Albert York's paintings are popular partly because, as Gertrude Stein said of herself, he has a small audience." That situation hasn't changed much, and there's no real reason why it should. York's audience has increased apace with his output—which is to say, slowly and at irregular intervals. He has earned the sort of notoriety that seems destined to make no waves; like the succinct, unforced grandeur of his paintings, it thrives on an air of privacy, forthright but silent as to its origins.

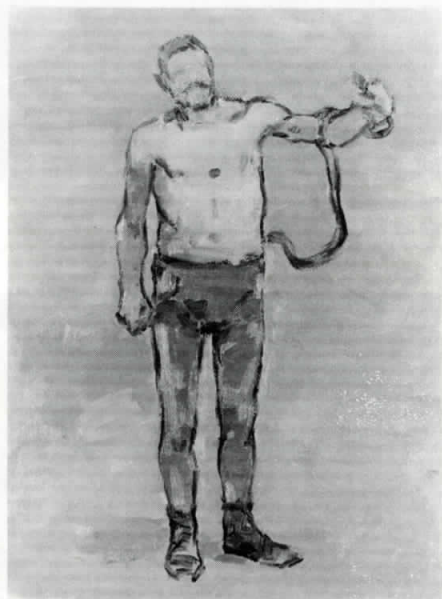
York was born in Detroit in 1928. Sometime in his early 30s, having completed formal art studies in Detroit and Ontario (and after a ten-year hiatus of which virtually nothing is known), he appeared in New York. He seems to have spent the early '60s shuttling between the city and eastern Long Island, eventually settling in East Hampton around 1963, the year of his first show. He now lives in nearby Water Mill. He trained and worked for a time in Manhattan as a gilder with the framer and painter Robert Kulicke in the latter's frame shop, and it was Kulicke who brought York's paintings to the attention of Leroy Davis at whose uptown gallery he has shown ever since.

By now York is famous for not appearing—a recluse by art-world standards, meticulously apart from the scene, who for the last six years has sent paintings to Davis and his partner Cecily Langdale one at a time (at last count, 11 in the past three years) in plain brown wrappers. Before, he used to deliver them by hand, in grocery bags. Among some 325 works documented in the gallery file, there are panel paintings mounted or done directly on wood or masonite, watercolors, woodcuts, and Conté-crayon, pencil and charcoal drawings. They arrive unsigned, untitled, without dates or frames. A recent crayon self-portrait head shows the kind of sturdy, concentrated mien the pictures would lead one to expect: the high, smooth brow sloping to gently angular features around a wide, fixed stare, and the mouth shut firmly above a strong chin.

York's last three shows at Davis & Langdale, including the one this past March, were mostly loan exhibitions mixing recent and



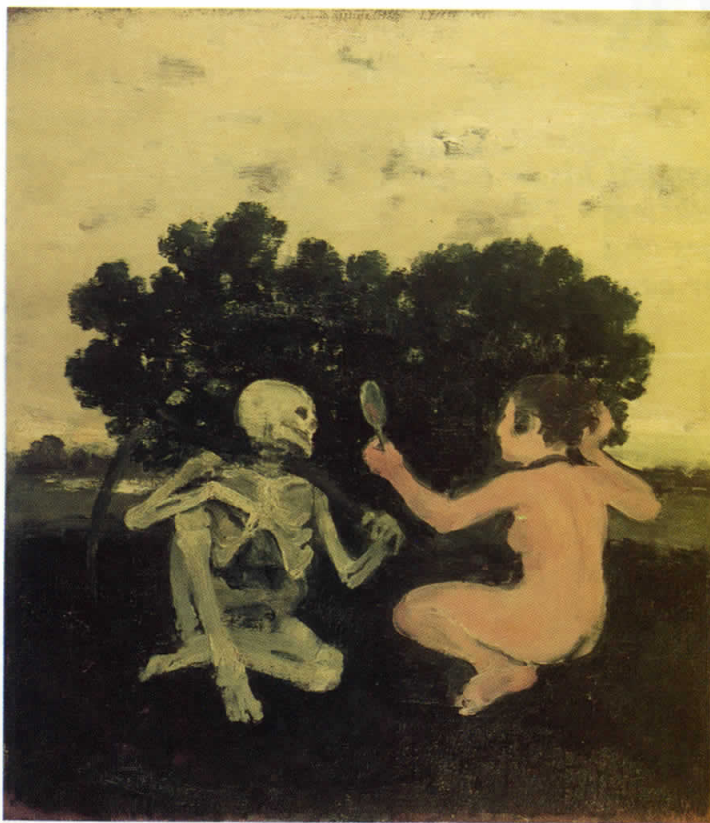
**Self-Portrait, 1988,**  
charcoal on brown paper,  
17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> by 19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches.



**Man with Snake, 1988,**  
oil on canvasboard,  
11<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> by 8<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches.



**York's world is exquisitely at rest; everything fits neatly, yet bristling disturbance seems imminent at every carefully tended edge.**



*Skeleton and Nude in a Landscape, ca. 1968, oil on board, 12 by 11 inches.*



*The Gray Dog, ca. 1967, oil on wood, 9 by 10 3/8 inches.*

earlier work. Lately, the gallery has taken to clamping the newer paintings in wide, black-painted wood frames, which accentuate their staginess—their luminosity and puppet-theater scale—but at the same time surround them with a heavy, funereal aura. The pictures since around 1980 are distinguished by a generally brighter palette blended with aerating whites. Although such variants occur, York's themes and ways of handling them are otherwise pretty well set; he seems to have been clear from the start about the kinds of things he wanted to paint. Reviewing his first show, Lawrence Campbell identified a basic range of subject matter—"fields, trees, ponds, a bird, a bull, a face or two, a figure in front of a wood"—and at least a partial artistic lineage: "the poetry of a Ryder, and without looking much like Ryder, either."

York paints small, perfect, eminently grounded pictures. The first thing you notice about them is their uniformly modest size, ordinarily about a foot in one dimension and a couple of inches shorter in the other. Next, you see their intensity, which partly depends on the particular size of the work and the just-so measure of imagery it contains. The paintings don't read as delicate miniatures; the compressed energy they embody holds up, clear and vibrant, across a room. Inspected up close, each little panel is tight as a drum. The intensity is baffling, as if unintended, out of hand; you feel that the painter would soften its impact if only he could, and let a gracile anonymity suffice. Or, on the contrary, that his obvious love of painting might spill over, become excessive, even expressionistically gross. That doesn't happen either. Instead, the epigrammatic statement of a typical motif—a broadly lit, open clearing or meadow with some trees and an occasional figure or two—registers a charge of finely adjusted, murmuring acuties. The view touches off an alarm: the world is shown exquisitely at rest; everything fits neatly (if a bit illogically) with everything else, yet bristling disturbance seems imminent at every carefully tended edge.

There's something inclement beneath all that idyllic sunlight, a bruxism out of key with the blithely tumbled midday glow, and an elegiac mood that turns the convex pressure of accumulated dabs and dry swishes of paint teetering reflectively back on itself. The light could falter, the whole scene evanesce or fall apart as you look on. A quietly refined oil sketch has an urgent, ex-voto intimacy. The postponement of collapse, like a hypnagogic pause over the void, is mesmerizing.

**Y**ork's prime subject is a possible landscape grasped within an imaginary suspended moment. In duration and breadth, the moment has a compact classicism. The brushed-up solid surface gives each ceremonial visionary fact a flinty, prosaic look. The uncertainty of moment crackles with the sureness of fate. The landscape views are both real and invented and both ways scrupulously observed. Provisionally, their vistas are of that Holy Land of American painting, the South Fork of eastern Long Island, its low-lying residual stretch of glacial moraine swathed with light that flares and gleams through thin, high Atlantic summer mists. York doesn't play out the celebrated panoramic horizontality of the locale but truncates it or else lets the image trail off in frayed ridges of paint that stop just short of the panel edge. In his hands, this landscape-cum-realist's-oyster doubles as a mutable stage set. It's as if a scrim of shallow-rooted trees and broad sky had sprouted forward, issuing over the proscenium floor a carpet of ripe verdure.

The place of these exterior views is properly a meadow like "the enamelled green" of Dante's Limbo on the outskirts of Hell, where shades of classic philosophers gather to converse. The still expanse always looks entered upon as if for the first time. York keeps it open to a cast of intermittent and seemingly interchangeable stock characters—nudes and other figures clothed or half-clothed in some sort





White Lights, East Hampton, ca. 1964, oil on wood, 8 by 10 inches.

of generic period dress. There are dairy cows whose lineaments reframe the landscape, cut flowers put into pots or tins, a hound, a beetle, a meandering, bloated snake. The mostly upright human figures arrive in flurries of brushmarks like prismatic wood chips. Their flesh and earth tones are keyed to the landscape as parcels of the life that is there, inherent as the grass and its gray granite underpinnings.

Pasternak said, "Poetry is in the grass." Who paints grass? Edward Hopper fanned it out in receding waves to draw down peripheries of veering light. Alex Katz sweeps it frontally, to make a spatial eyeful coextensive with a split second's blink. York interprets the full, less brilliant fact of grass underfoot—a tough, moist or crisp chlorophyll clump, its light and bulk gotten in the same slow breeding of greens and gray. (York works mainly in a range of closely matched halftones; all his greens are dense and calculated, and some are chilling.)

Across this live turf, panel by panel, you follow the sauntering, metamorphosed lives of the characters, each episode occurring along a strip of middle distance: a barrel-chested, mustachioed gent, like a carnival strongman, grapples with a snake; back on the ground, the

snake makes a rivulet heading for a pair of trees; a lone Indian sits before the trees, puffing on a pipe; two faceless women in sunbonnets stand looking at a cow (the cow glowers—you catch the look of the women by the slightly oblique set of facial shadings and contours against the shoulders); then more trees enter, three or four of them calling to one another across a shallow pond; a recumbent dog displaces the pond, to be pounced on by three others of the same breed—the same shorthaired mongrel depicted indoors as *The Gray Dog* and *Seated Dog*, both ca. 1967 (York, it should be noted, is one of the foremost dog portraitists after Bonnard). Next, the trees close ranks to form a bush before which sit a greenish-white skeleton and a woman, naked but for a black band at her neck, who eyes her reflection (the slightest fleck of pink) in a hand mirror. The skeleton grins sociably, balancing a scythe on one shoulder like a parasol.

Two more paintings show flowers outdoors in a close-up chin-to-ground perspective. In one, a beetle built of nine cobbled strokes approaches a monstrous blue tomato can stuffed with carnations. In the other, three towering red tulips (with a supernumerary fourth stem) have broken through the foreground loam to dwarf a distant horse and rider cantering just below the horizon from the right-hand



**York conflates Old-World Classical presence with a bedrock feeling for the American neo-antique—in other words, history with genre.**



*Carnations in a Blue Can with a Beetle in a Landscape, 1982, oil on wood, 14 1/4 by 13 9/16 inches.*

edge. If the off-center emphasis on shadowy relations between the insect and flowers feels strange, the lack of any emphasis at all makes the tulips picture even stranger.

**T**he plants in York's pictures often resist classification. His trees say "tree" but are otherwise botanically moot. With their broad leaves and spindly perpendicular trunks, are they young maples? sycamores? or a composite? Are tulip leaves that bushy? Why do the carnations look eked out of clay? On the other hand, the recent still-life interiors have the unassuming arrangements (including obligatory forward tilts) of high-fidelity, generic flower pieces. They are as generic as their colors are economical and fraught. According to Leroy Davis, "Right now York's fixation is with Manet" (presumably meaning not just the latter's late flower paintings but also *Olympia*, of which York has done an oddball, floppy reprise). The succulence of *Plant with Purple Flowers in a Terra Cotta Pot* (1986) stays put while the table and wall drink in the light off the leaves. The strength of each flower is defined in its ability to hold a specific light not more brilliant than the summary light of the painting.

Fairfield Porter wrote that the reciprocally inclined *Twin Trees* (ca. 1963) "could be Baucis and Philomen after Zeus, at their death, changed them." York's trees are in fact his most overtly realized characters. They're more philosophically disposed than his people, who, although allegorical in their own right, tend to appear introspective or stunned, caught up in consequences left undeclared.

Where the people fade in and out even as they show themselves, the trees, advancing always in full leaf, project a quasi-permanence as custodians—floating modifiers of the presiding topography of earth and sky. Like the people, they coexist but never touch. The skies beat laterally against them, enlarging upon stacked tiers of horizon. The side-to-side motion of the atmosphere reinforces the feeling of solid ground as well as the play of substance against mirage. Even York's recurring ponds seem like mirages. The merest streaks and smudges in his repertoire of forms, they're like premature aerial distances; they don't hold water so much as return the sky's look sullenly, with a shallow, glazed, no-comment tone.

The paintings show a tender regard for the paradoxes of figural space. The sturdiness of York's figures is circumstantial, part of the compactness of his paint. Except for a few direct portraits, the figures materialize as ghosts out of thin air. (The thin air is often traces of masonite showing through the paint.) Transfixed from head to toe in chunky bodily frames—the chunkiest figures since Cézanne—they appear to have just discovered gravity. They take appearance seriously, as allegories must. The cruel joke of course is in putting the indefinite, enigmatic appearance out in the open, in a natural light. The light consigns the displaced actors to cardboard cameo roles. Their big scenes happen—or might have happened—elsewhere, off the set. They share with the trees a haunted, mythological aspect, but the trees have more immediate business.

**Y**ork conflates Old-World Classical presence with a bedrock feeling for the American neo-antique—in other words, history with genre. An image may derive from 19th-century nautical carvings or turn-of-the-century poster prints, as well as from a fascination with the French outdoor and still-life traditions from Corot and the Barbizon landscapists to Manet and Cézanne. Many of York's indigenous figures assume the classiest of Classical gestures: just standing still and alone, holding something. How "realist" are they? To Baudelaire, George Catlin's American Indian portraits made antique sculpture real, or at any rate "comprehensible." In the same vein, York's *Indian Brave and Indian Chief* (1978), which is not a portrait but a double apparition, has a blunt, believable grace. The two figures settle with an unponderous gravity squarely on the spot; they're stocky but of a buoyancy that, lifted against the bleary sky, feels both humorous and heroic. Their presence goes with the ground beneath their feet and comments on its mutability.

It's not as if York exhibits a yearning for exotic bygone modes, or for history as such. Rather, you sense that he has thoughtfully absorbed the meanings of anomalous things, their peculiar, visible truths. To him they're as contemporary and familiar as his backyard—he only has to look a little harder to recognize their contours. His paintings express the impartial wonder that things begin and end just where they are. The paintings may err toward the simplistically decorative at times, but there are no false notes. For example, in *Flying Figure in Landscape* (ca. 1970), the luminous votive figure looks to have bounded full-blown from behind a row of bushes, her hair and drapery a slightly drier version of the scummy blackish greens of the field. She hovers and twists and extends herself as integrally as the weather, which hangs on the view a massive, blotted, dull-porcelain white. A gallery note describes the painting's genesis thus: "According to the artist, the flying figure with goat legs is a Hindu goddess of peace who doesn't appear in Indian art but presumably in literature. The painting was originally taller, and there was a group of three figures over whom this goddess was showering blessings. However, this group was cut off and painted out." □

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*Indian Brave and Indian Chief, 1978, oil on masonite, 10¾ by 10 inches. All works this article are from private collections, photos courtesy Davis & Langdale, Inc.*