

## PROFILE

## ARTIST UNKNOWN

*Is it possible to become a much sought-after artist in America and still maintain independence and anonymity? Albert York, who has been defying contemporary art-world conventions for three decades—even admirers of his work weren't sure if he really existed—emerges for a rare interview.*

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

ALBERT YORK may be the most highly admired unknown artist in America. Ask any contemporary dealer or collector what he thinks of York's paintings, and nineteen times out of twenty you will get a blank stare. This is amazing when you consider that York has had twelve one-man shows in New York over the last thirty-two years (the most recent one is at the Davis & Langdale Company, on East Sixtieth Street, through June 23rd), and that his work has received very favorable and sometimes awed notices from any number of well-known critics. Reviewing York's first show, in 1963, at the Davis Galleries on East Sixtieth Street, the *Art News* critic Lawrence Campbell wrote, "His small paintings of fields, trees, ponds, a bird, a bull, a face or two, a figure in front of a wood, shine with the poetry of a Ryder, and without looking much like a Ryder, either." That is still a good description of York's work, which has changed very little over three decades. His colors are lighter than they used to be, and his paint handling is more seductive, but the scale and the format of his pictures have remained the same—slightly less than a foot square in most cases—and there has been no letup in the mysterious tension that makes his images indelible.

Those who do know about Albert York tend to be fanatical in their admiration. The painter Susan Rothenberg, who chose York for the 1984 "Artists Choose Artists" show at the CDS Gallery, on the Upper East Side, has said that she "just fell in love with the beauty and simplicity and purity of the work" and also with a certain raw, awkward quality—a sense that "each time he paints, he paints for the first time." The sculptor Robert Grosvenor owns two

York landscapes, and he takes them with him, in a box he made for the purpose, when he leaves home for a few days. "I really need them around me, somehow," he told me recently. The late Jacqueline Onassis owned six York paintings, the last of which was given to her by her friend Maurice Tempelsman just a short time before she died. Edward Gorey, the artist and book illustrator, has five, and says he would buy anything of York's, sight unseen, if anything were available. (A new painting by York could bring at least twenty thousand dollars today, and quite possibly a lot more than that.) Klaus Kertess, the curator who organized this year's Whitney Biennial, wanted to include York in the show but couldn't, because the Biennial is limited to work done within the last two years and York has not released a new painting in three years. Kertess did include York's work in a three-artist show of landscape paintings at the Parrish Art Museum, in Southampton, Long Island, in 1989. He worked closely with the two other artists involved, Jane Freilicher and April Gornik, but he didn't meet York then and hasn't met him since, and at the time neither Kertess nor anyone else at the museum knew for sure whether York, who lives only a few miles away, in Water Mill, ever came to see the show.

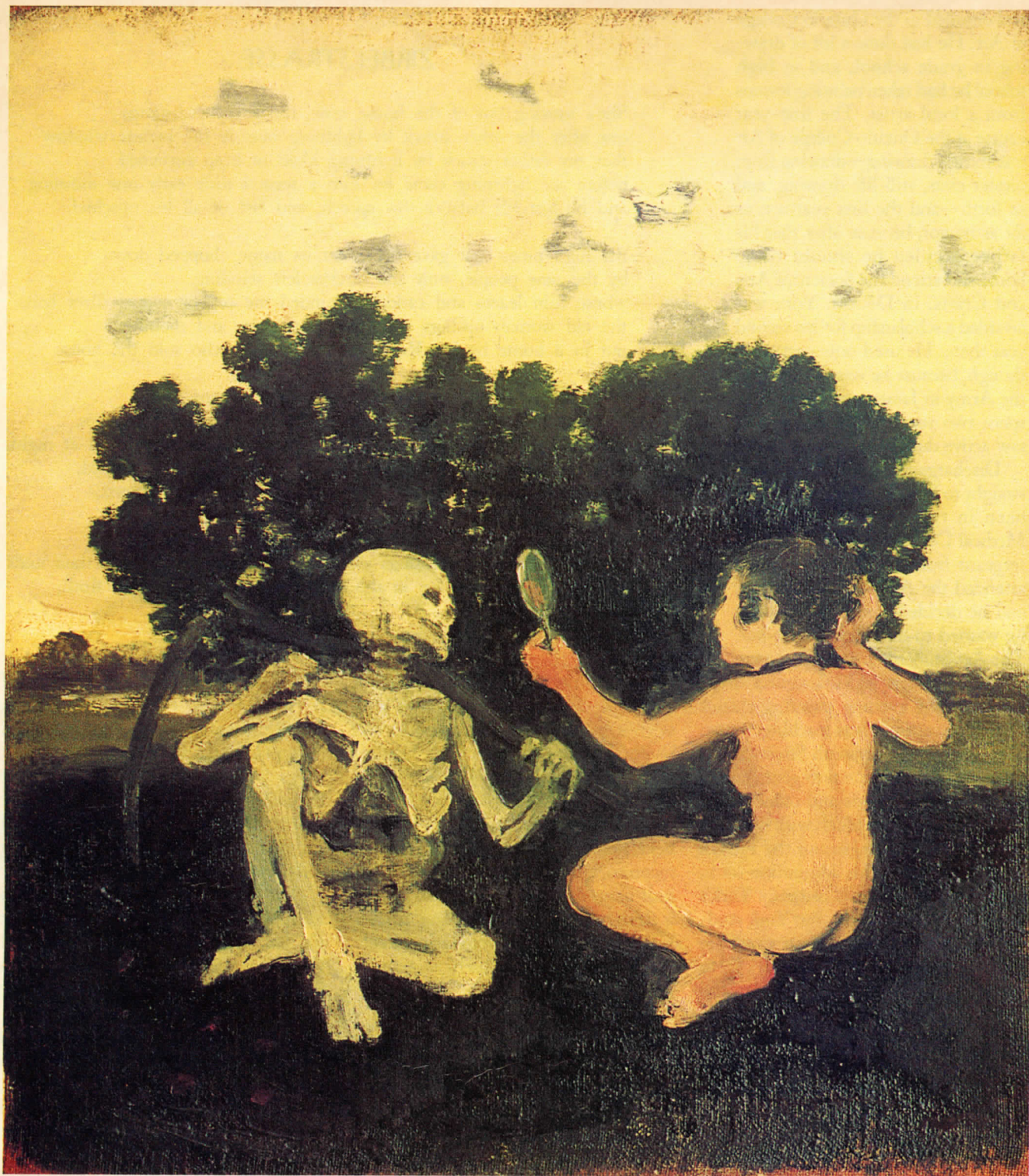
Leroy Davis and Cecily Langdale, York's longtime dealers, have had relatively little contact with the artist in recent years. York's rate of production declined precipitously after the Parrish Museum show, and it stopped altogether in June of 1992. The Davises (Roy Davis and Cecily Langdale are married) try to buy back for the gallery any York that comes on the market.

Their private collection covers all the characteristic York themes and includes several of the strange allegorical pictures that crop up in his work from time to time, such as the 1967 "Woman and Skeleton," which shows a nude woman and a skeleton seated on the ground, having what looks like an animated conversation. "Woman and Skeleton" is in some ways the quintessential York painting. Although it obviously refers to the *vanitas* theme of earlier art—the woman holds a mirror in her left hand, and the skeleton is shouldering a scythe—the picture also manages to evoke Manet in the physicality of its paint handling, while locating the viewer in a murky, moonlit landscape that is somewhat ominous and full of ambiguity. Is the woman looking at herself in the mirror, or holding it up to reflect the skeleton's features? Is the skeleton male or female? The figures strain against the confines of the twelve-by-eleven-inch picture space, and are seemingly out of scale with a clump of trees directly behind them. Nothing quite fits. The effect is monumental and humorous at the same time.

It struck both the Davises as highly unlikely that York would agree to be interviewed. To everyone's surprise, though, he did. He showed up right on time at Bobby Van's restaurant, in Bridgehampton, where I had suggested that we meet. York turned out to be a rather handsome man in a gray tweed jacket: he had white hair, greenish-brown eyes, a square face with deep vertical lines framing the mouth, and not a trace of the hunted-animal look that his reputation had more or less led me to expect. York had a slow, rather formal way of talking. There were moments

*Albert York's "Woman and Skeleton," 1967 (opposite page).*





during our conversation that day and during a subsequent conversation when he clearly felt uncomfortable, and now and then he apologized for not answering a question adequately, but to me his answers seemed remarkably candid, thoughtful, and unself-conscious.

Albert York was born in Detroit in 1928. His parents separated soon after-

ward—they were not married—and York grew up believing that his mother was dead. Since his father could not take care of him, he spent the first seven years of his life in a nursery/boarding school in Fenton, Michigan, a town near Flint. York's father, Albert, Sr., was born in London; *his* parents had emigrated to Canada when he was sixteen, and he had

become a Canadian citizen and served in the Canadian Army during the First World War. After the war, he came down to Detroit and found a job as a metalworker in the automobile industry.

When York was fourteen, he was sent to live with his father's married sister, in Belleville, Ontario. He graduated from high school there five years later,



and enrolled in the Ontario College of Art. He had done a lot of drawing in grade school, and in high school he had taken painting lessons from a local artist. The first-year course at the Ontario College of Art was mostly drawing—drawing from plaster casts, still-life drawing, and so forth—and the first year was as far as he got, because after that his father decided he should come home and attend the Society of Arts and Crafts, in Detroit. York was awarded a scholarship for his second year there. He used only part of it, though, because he was drafted into the Army in January of 1951. York spent two years in the Army, and saw active duty in the Korean War.

Discharged in 1952, York came straight to New York. While he had been in training with an Army Medical Corps in Seattle, he met a sergeant from the Bronx who had attended the Art Students League, and he decided that this was what he wanted to do when he got out. The Art Students League fees were too high, though, so York signed up instead for the evening painting classes that Raphael Soyer was teaching, in two rooms on West Fifty-sixth Street. Soyer, whose social realism ran to genre paintings of tired shopgirls and office workers, had a sensuous touch with paint. A great admirer of Degas and the French school, he passed this admiration on to his pupils, and he was certainly York's most important teacher, but York studied with him for only a short time. He had to take on all sorts of odd jobs to pay for the lessons and for his room and board, and after four or five months he found that he was just too tired at night to paint, so he quit painting and went to work full time. He had a lot of different jobs during the next five years. He worked on trucks in the garment district, loading and unloading heavy bolts of cloth. What got him out of this dead period was going to work in Robert Kulicke's picture-frame workshop.

Robert Kulicke is famous today for designing and developing a metal picture frame that virtually took over the contemporary frame market in the nineteen-sixties. Before that, he had studied and mastered the ancient craft of wood-frame-making, and his shop, Kulicke Frames, on York Avenue at Seventy-

## ZIRBELSTRASSE

She's moving out of the house now, the sticky sycamores  
one after the other struck by lightning outside the picture window  
that my father struck by lightning liked to keep curtained  
before the lightning came for him a second time early one morning  
and he lost his balance, his speech, and last of all his mischief,

the high pines that gave the street its name chopped down  
by the new people, only the birches left standing,  
whose thin leaves and catkins reminded me of her copper-silver hair,  
the old woman upstairs with all her marbles and mobility  
put in a home by her Regan of a daughter, who sold the house

over the heads of my parents, sitting-duck tenants,  
bourgeois gypsies, wheeled suitcases on top of fitted wardrobes,  
the windows where my sister's criminal boyfriends climbed in at night,  
over the hedge the pool where the dentist's children screamed,  
the old couple next door, *Duzfreunde* of Franz Josef Strauss,

the patio stones with their ineradicable growths of moss,  
the weedy lawn where slugs set sail of an evening and met their ends  
like Magellan, sliced up in the salty shallows of their own froth,

third Street, was considered one of the best in the business. Being an artist himself—a painter—Kulicke liked to hire young artists to work for him. His best gilder was a man named Jerry Anderson, who had been in Raphael Soyer's class with Albert York; in 1957, when Kulicke needed another gilder, Anderson recommended York, and Kulicke took him on and trained him. York became a first-rate gilder, according to Kulicke—deft, careful, completely reliable, and incredibly shy. "I spent hours talking to him in the shop," Kulicke recalls—Kulicke is a world-class talker—"but I don't recall a single thing he ever said except 'Yes,' 'No,' or 'Maybe.'"

At that time, York still wasn't doing any painting or drawing. He didn't start again until 1959 or 1960. Everybody's favorite Albert York story is that his wife didn't know he was an artist until six months after they were married, when she came into their kitchen one day and saw him drawing horses to amuse one of her children. When I asked York about this, he looked mystified. He and Virginia Mann Caldwell, whom he met at a party in an artist's loft in 1959, had taken her two children on a four-month trip to France in 1960, before they were married, he said, and he had brought

along his paintbox and done a lot of painting in the French countryside. Since the story came originally from Virginia, who told it to Roy Davis, it may have been simply that she did not know he was an artist when they first met; at that time, York hadn't painted for six or seven years, and he certainly did not consider himself an artist.

The trip to Europe was Virginia's idea. She had spent her junior year at the Sorbonne when she was a Barnard College student, and later on she and her first husband had lived in Paris for a time, working for the Marshall Plan. York said, with a chuckle, "She decided we were going to France, so we went to France." They spent a month in Paris, but only one day in the Louvre. ("The Louvre is so huge, and we had the youngsters with us, and they kept disappearing.") From Paris they worked their way south, and they ended up in a pension just outside Toulon. This was where York really started painting again. He took his paintbox out into the fields, like an Impressionist. The pictures he painted were nothing like Impressionism, though; they were small, concentrated, and rather dark, with a predominance of green and blue halftones. He had no interest in reproducing specific



the potatoes my father bestirred himself to grow one year,  
gravelly bullets too diamond-hard to take a fork,

moving with all the books, the doubtful assets of a lifetime,  
the steel table only I had the wit to assemble and left my feet on,  
the furniture and lamps picked up in border raids to Italy,  
once austere challenging, now out-of-date *moderne*,  
too gloomy to read by, and sad as anything not bought old,

the Strindberg kitchen with the dribbling Yugoslav fridge,  
the Meissen collection we disliked and weren't allowed to use,  
the démodé gadgets for making yogurt, for Turkish coffee,  
the turkey cutlets not so much cooked as made safe in the frypan  
the more cooking cut corners and dwindled and became rehash,

my off-and-on kingdom in the cellar, among the skis and old boots,  
my father's author's copies and foreign editions,  
the blastproof metal doors, preserves, tin cans, and board games  
of people who couldn't forget the Russians, the furnace room  
where my jeans were baked hard against an early morning departure.

—MICHAEL HOFMANN

landscapes. "I would see this tree or that tree, and put it down on the panel, but rearrange the whole thing," he said. "I invented it. It came to mind as I was working."

**Y**ORK and Caldwell returned to New York in the late summer of 1960, and got married in October. For the next two years, they lived in an apartment on East Eighty-fourth Street. York went back to work at Kulicke Frames, but he started going there at 5 A.M. so he could quit at around three and have an hour or so to paint before dark. He painted mostly in Central Park, on small wooden panels; sometimes he would glue canvas to them first, but mostly he painted on the wood itself. He also spent a lot of time in museums during this period. "I looked at just about everything in the Metropolitan," he told me. He liked the work of the Ashcan School painters, George Bellows and John Sloan and Robert Henri and George Luks, and he developed a reverence for Manet and Cézanne, and also for certain Old Masters—Giovanni Bellini's "St. Francis in the Desert," at the Frick, made a profound impression on him—but the painter who then excited him most was Albert Pinkham Ryder.

He remembers seeing at the Metropolitan a temporary installation of paintings by Ryder, Eastman Johnson, Winslow Homer, and several other Americans. "The Ryders were the only ones that really held up, for me," he said. "They were so small, but so strong that they outdid everything else in the room. The whole universe was there in those small pictures. Ryder knew how to fit together the negative and positive forms—clouds, sky, trees, the sea. He locked it all in."

Contemporary art barely registered on York's aesthetic compass. He knew that Abstract Expressionism had become the dominant influence both here and abroad, and he also knew that it had nothing to do with him. "It was a different world," he said. "Naturally, it froze you—made you think, What are you doing with your tiny panels?" He stayed with his tiny panels, which never looked like miniatures; seen from a distance, they had a monumental presence that caught and held the eye. Jerry Anderson saw a few of them, and persuaded York to show them to Bob Kulicke. "I immediately saw it was terrific work," Kulicke recalls. "You know, I'm a good painter, but Al is a great painter. Better than I

am, the prick." Kulicke got in touch with his friend and colleague Roy Davis, who ran a small art gallery that had started out as a showroom for Kulicke Frames, and told him about Al York. Davis had also wanted to be a painter; he and Kulicke had been classmates at the Tyler School of Art, in Philadelphia. Although Davis no longer painted, he had a keen eye for the sort of painterly touch that was rapidly becoming obsolete in art, and he immediately invited York to join the gallery. This was in 1962, the year Pop art broke into the clear as a rambunctious antidote to Abstract Expressionism. Al York and the mainstream of modern art were headed in opposite directions.

Davis gave York his first show the following March. It got good reviews (including Lawrence Campbell's in *Art News*), and most of the paintings were sold, at prices that sound ridiculous today—a hundred and fifty to four hundred dollars—but were respectable then. York and

his wife and his two stepchildren had left the city by that time and moved out to East Hampton, where Virginia's parents had a house. They rented a small house on Derby Lane, and York took the train into the city five days a week to work at Kulicke's. Eventually, the commuting got to be too much for him. He quit Kulicke's, and found work painting houses and doing rough carpentry in the East Hampton area. He also painted a lot of pictures in those years, partly "to keep the income going, you know, support the family." Most of his pictures were on wood. There was al-

ways scrap lumber around the construction sites he worked on, and he would salvage a good-sized piece and cut it up into usable

squares. Every so often, he brought his paintings in to Davis Galleries himself, unsigned and untitled, in a brown paper bag. (Later on, when he stopped coming into town, he wrapped them in brown paper and sent them by ordinary mail.) Some of his best work dates from the nineteen-sixties—the dense, brooding landscapes with two or three trees and a flash of water in the middle distance. They are simple yet compelling images that show an awareness of art





history (the landscape tradition established in the seventeenth century by Claude Lorrain) but at the same time project a very contemporary sense of unease. He also painted still-lives, farmhouses, human figures in landscapes, and cows. York tends to think of his cow pictures as "potboiling," because he often fell back on them when he didn't have another subject in mind. They were not particularly easy to like—not nearly as ingratiating to the eye as his still-lives of flowers. An interior decorator used to come to the gallery and buy several York paintings at a time, to place in apartments she was decorating. That bothered Roy Davis—he envisioned York landscapes being used as decorative "accents" in back hallways, where nobody would ever look at them—but the Yorks obviously needed the money. They had moved into Virginia's parents' house, on Sag Harbor Road, which she had inherited. York never suggested that his prices should be any higher. Almost always, when he brought or mailed in a new painting he said that it wasn't good enough, and that he hoped to do better with the next one.

York kept in touch with his father, who had moved back to Ontario. In 1972, when the elder York was dying of cancer, he confided to his son a stunning piece of news: Albert's mother was alive. She was living in Florida, and was a successful real-estate broker there. Her husband had died recently, and she and York's father had reestablished contact, and now she wanted to see Albert. "Meeting her for the first time was pretty rough," according to York, but he and his mother managed to work out a relationship. After his father died, in 1973, York and his mother went to Canada together to settle the estate. He did a painting of her there, sitting in the grass; her features are barely distinguishable, as is the case in most of his figure paintings. Some years later, York began receiving a small income from a trust fund that his mother had set up in his name. The Davises say that it was harder to get pictures out of him after that.

**Y**ORK'S pictures became stranger. He painted a burly semi-nude man holding a snake. (Snakes also appear in some of his landscape paintings.) He did

a "Reclining Female Nude with Cat," which was a weird takeoff on Manet's "Olympia." The nude, like all York's nudes, is graceless and anti-erotic, and the cat is huge—way out of normal scale. Blocky, totemic-looking Indians appear in several paintings. One of them depicts a man in armor, an Indian, and a crocodile in a tropical setting; it was done during or shortly after a visit to his mother in Florida. The men and women in York's pictures often wear nineteenth-century clothing—long skirts and old-fashioned hats. He paints them this way, he told me, because today's clothes are so uninteresting visually. During the nineteen-seventies, York spent a lot of time in the East Hampton Library, reading books on art history. Art books and catalogues sometimes gave him ideas for paintings. Since he had no live models to pose for him (his wife wouldn't do it), he used Manet's "Olympia" instead. "I didn't copy it," he said. "Just painted from memory. That's why you get that chunky figure." He doesn't like his version much. To him it looks "like a student's piece of work."

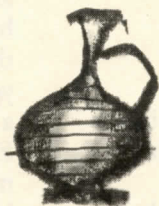
At one point, York attended a sketch class that the artists Aaron Shikler and David Levine had started in New York, with live models who would hold the same pose over a number of sessions. York felt that he needed to do more drawing, even though he never used drawings as preliminary studies for his paintings. At the first sketch class he attended, though, a sociable colleague came over to look at what he was doing, and York picked up his things, walked out, and never went back.

It was ironic, his living out there on the East End of Long Island with all the wealthy collectors and dealers and successful artists, not to mention the stockbrokers and the virtuosos of arbitrage. York had no contact with any of them. Fairfield Porter, who was a respected critic as well as an artist, looked him up in the nineteen-sixties. Porter put York in a 1965 group show at the Parrish Art Museum, in Southampton, and he wrote a brief essay for the catalogue of York's 1975 show at the Davis & Long Company. (Roy Davis had gone into business with Meredith Long by then, and they had opened a large and ambitious gallery on Mad-

ison Avenue.) York and Porter had two or three conversations, but that was it; they did not become friends. Some people wondered whether Albert York really existed. There was speculation that he might be a pseudonym for an established artist with a reputation for working in a completely different style.

The Yorks moved away from the East End in 1981. Virginia sold the house on Sag Harbor Road and bought an old house in Philadelphia, to be near her daughter. York rented a studio nearby, but nothing felt right about it, and after three months he gave it up and moved back to Long Island. For the next two years, he and Virginia lived separately, getting together occasionally on weekends or holidays. York lived in rented houses in the East Hampton area and, for a few months, outside Narragansett, Rhode Island. Living alone, with only a dog for company, seemed to make him much more productive. Some of his strongest paintings date from those two years: "Carnations in a Blue Can with a Beetle in a Landscape," for example, and "Three Red Tulips in a Landscape with Horse and Rider." These paintings introduce a new element—still-life juxtaposed with landscape. In each of them, a floral still-life is placed in the foreground of a landscape, with unsettling results: the flowers seem huge, and they make the background even more miragelike than it usually is in York's landscapes. In the second painting, three gigantic, Brodingnagian tulips dwarf a shadowy horse and rider (Ryder?) just entering the picture from its right edge. The picture reads like a hallucination—real and unreal held in the same taut embrace.

**S**EVERAL times during our conversations, York referred to his work as being out of date. "The modern world just passes me by," he said wryly, without self-pity. "I don't notice it. I missed the train." But during the eighties the modern world kept rediscovering Albert York. His prices rose steadily; by the middle of the decade Davis was selling his paintings for five thousand dollars and more. Although York barely registered in the booming, publicity-mad art market of the period, the people who bought his work now tended to be involved with contemporary art—people





like Susan Rothenberg, and the future dealer Matthew Marks (he started buying York paintings in 1983, when he was a twenty-year-old college student), and the avant-garde collectors Carl Lobell and Werner Kramarsky. Kramarsky bought "Three Red Tulips in a Landscape with Horse and Rider" in 1982 and the "Olympia" painting in 1984. Several museums became interested in York's work around that time. The Cleveland Museum acquired "Bird with Dead Moth." The Boston Museum of Fine Arts mounted a small Albert York exhibit in 1982, and the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston included York in a group show called "American Still Life 1945-1983," which went on tour to four other museums; Linda Cathcart, the Houston museum's director, wanted to do a full-dress York retrospective, but she also wanted to meet the artist and discuss it with him, and that, apparently, was asking too much. In spite of all this activity, most people seemed not to have heard of Albert York. It almost proved that if you really wanted to be left alone you could be. A lot of East Enders read and discussed Virginia York's letters to the editor of the East Hampton *Star* about world mythology. (Virginia York, who also writes poems, has been working for years on a book about mythology.) Very few of the local people knew then or know now that her husband is an artist.

York had not been consulted about any of the museum shows in which his paintings were included. The curators worked through Roy Davis, who has become, over the years, more and more protective of York's privacy. By 1982, Davis was no longer in partnership with Meredith Long, and in 1985 the gallery had moved back into its original quarters, at 231 East Sixtieth Street, under the name Davis & Langdale Company. When Klaus Kertess decided to put York in his 1989 show of three Long Island landscape painters

at the Parrish Art Museum, the Davises discouraged him from trying to get in touch with York. They were afraid that if York knew about the show in advance he might refuse to be in it. York did go to see the Parrish Museum show, shortly before it closed, and the experience was deeply painful for him. "I felt pretty upset about what I'd been doing for these last years," he told me. "It's pretty lousy—pardon the word—work. Pretty bad. It has no relation to good painting. I don't recognize myself in those things. I would like to do better. But, of course, it's there, and probably I will never be able to change it."

Since "those things" included what York's admirers consider to be some of his most powerful work—early landscapes, "Woman and Skeleton," "Reclining Female Nude with Cat," "Three Red Tulips in a Landscape with Horse and Rider"—his reaction is hard to fathom. My impression was that York's notion of an acceptable painting hovers somewhere near the level of Bellini's "St. Francis in the Desert." It may be that he truly has no idea how good his own work is, although that would suggest a naïveté that his intelligence belies. The last Parrish Museum show more or less stopped him in his tracks,

at any rate, and he has been struggling ever since to find his way again. "I just don't know exactly where I am right now," he said, "or where I'm going."

When I asked what it was about his work that he found so inadequate, he mentioned scale and color—he would like his paintings to be larger and more colorful. "I'm a black-and-white painter," he said. Black and white? "Well, light blue and dark green. Raphael Soyer tried to get me out of it. There are no reds in there, no oranges, no complement to the blues. I looked at the catalogue of a Seurat show a few years ago. Wonderful painter, marvellous with color. His little panels vibrate, they come to life. You look at one of my things and it's really dead."

The last painting that York sent in to the gallery was a still-life of flowers, lusciously painted, with delicate greens, light blue, peach, rose, and a good deal of yellow ochre. That was three years ago. Roy Davis has a mental image of York laboring on a picture and then scraping it down to the bare wood over and over again. York was often inclined to scrape his panels down and start over; in the past, he used to tell the Davises that he was finishing a still-life, and two weeks later they would re-



*"He picked up some kind of anger in England in the late fifties, and he's never been able to shake it."*



ceive a cow painting. "What Al doesn't understand is that in art you never hit what you're aiming at, but the difference may not be downward," Bob Kulicke says.

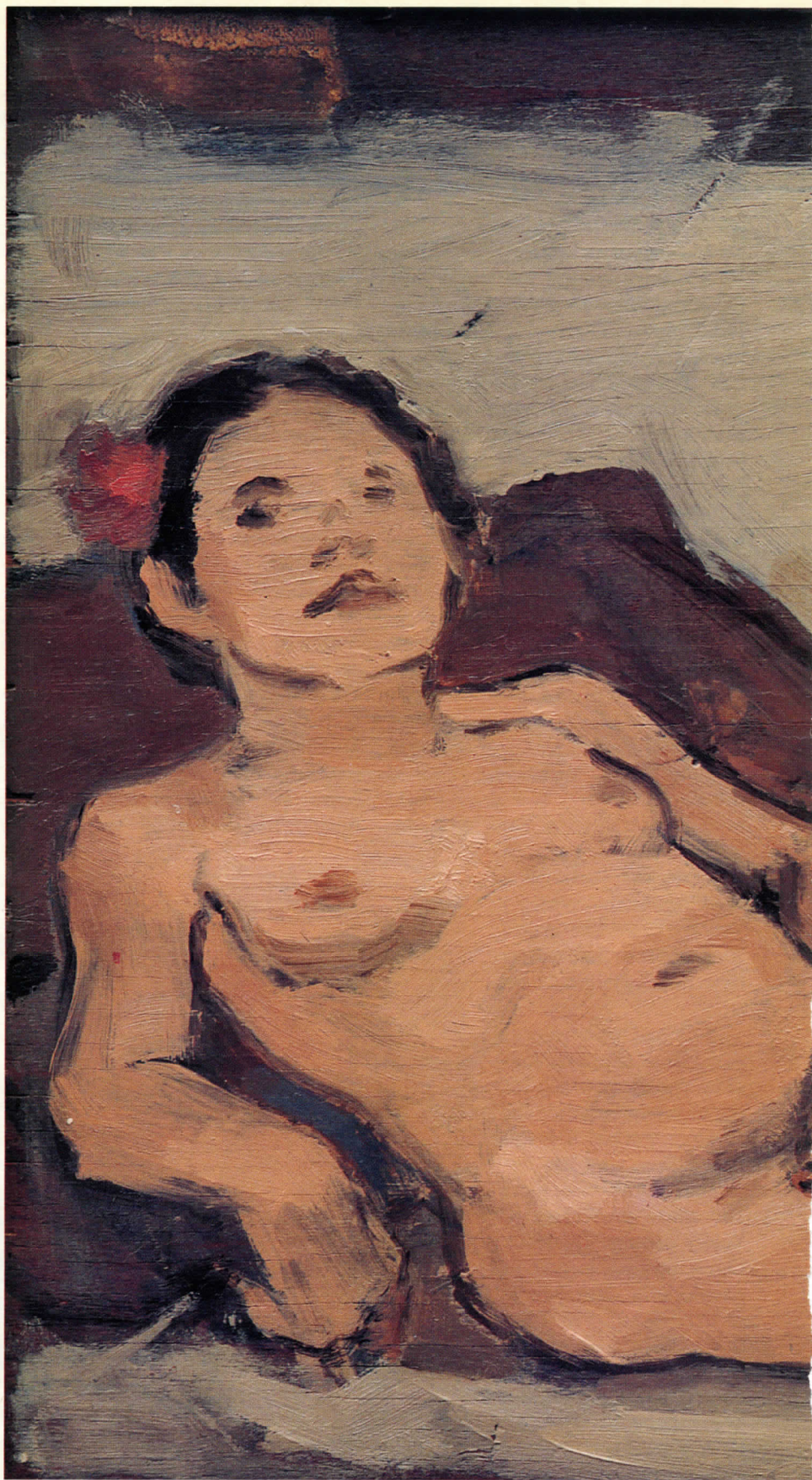
York conceded that he had been doing a lot of scraping down lately. He also gave me the impression that he worked every day. "I work in the basement right now, in the underworld," he said. "I get the early-morning sunlight through a couple of basement windows. I'm an early riser—up at 4:30 or 5 A.M. I get my *New York Times* in Southampton—you can get it early at the 7-Eleven. I take a look at the world and have a cup of coffee, and then I get to work."

I decided to ask him the impossible question: Why do you paint?

"I knew this was going to be difficult," he said, sighing. He put his cigarette out, slowly, and looked at the table. "I think we live in a paradise," he said. "This is a Garden of Eden, really it is. It might be the only paradise we ever know, and it's just so beautiful, with the trees and everything here, and you feel you want to paint it. Put it into a design. That's all I can say. It's been a rather trying business, this painting."

Had he ever found any real satisfaction in his work?

"Not really," came the slow reply. "Not really. Only one panel, maybe, one of the first I ever gave the Davises. It's a young woman with an arm or a hand on a tree, and there are some bushes, and a couple of other trees. I had red, green, blue, purple, and yellow—about the whole palette in that little panel. The drawing was good, a good rendering of the figure. It was our first summer in East Hampton after moving out from New York City, and out back of the house we had rented, in the next lot, there was a woman standing there, looking at her garden, and she had her hand up like that. She didn't see me. I stood there and memorized it. And then, about a week later, I went out there and put my paintbox down on the grass and painted it from memory. There was another element in my motivation, which is that my wife was mad as the devil at me at the time. Something about finances. So I had to get that bloody panel in to the Davises. Anyway, I sat down and did this thing, and it was one of the only things I really had satisfaction with." ♦







*"Reclining Female Nude with Cat," 1978.*