



Painting, above:
Division Street, 1984-85
oil on canvas; triptych
63 x 75 / 63 x 81 / 63 x 87 inches
Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts
Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, N.Y.

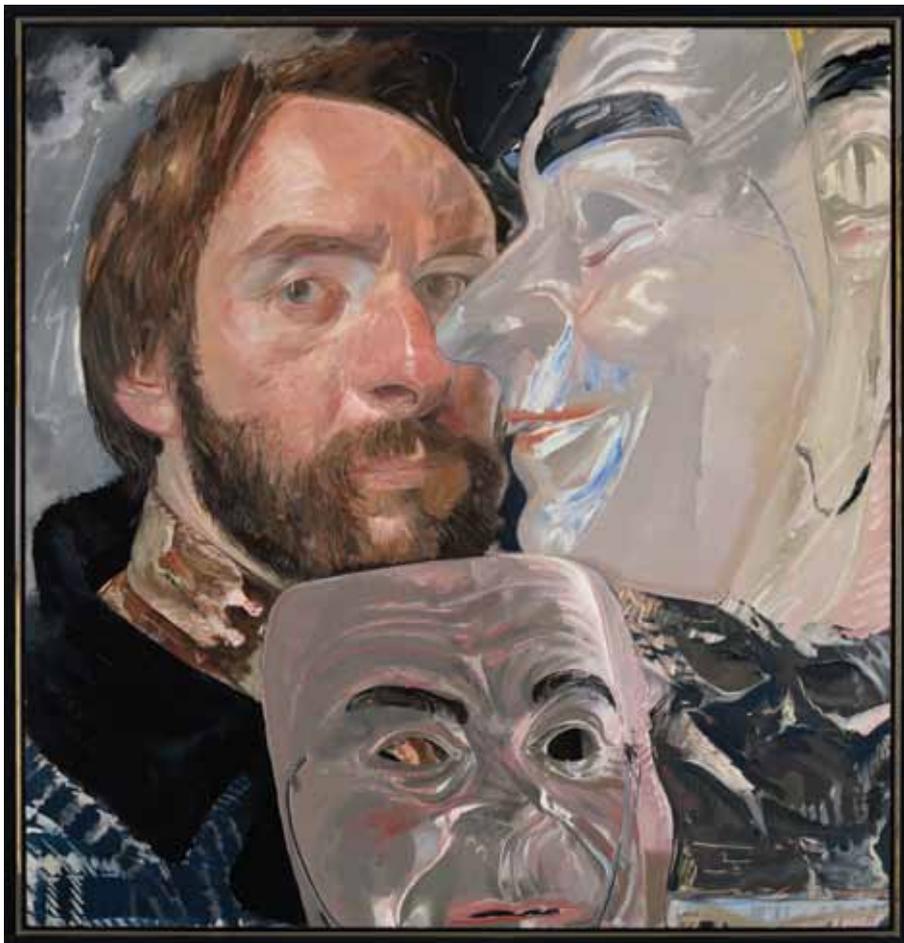
THE STORY MASTER



Jerome Witkin

The University
celebrates the art
of Professor
Jerome Witkin
with a 40-year
retrospective
this fall

BY NANCY KEEFE RHODES



Inside, Outside, 1976
oil on canvas
50 x 48 inches
The Everson Museum of Art

Courtney Rile '04, a young Syracuse videographer, vividly recalls the first time she met renowned artist and longtime Syracuse University professor Jerome Witkin. She was at a gallery opening in the Delavan Center, on Syracuse's Near West Side, where Witkin had a studio for 16 years until the infamous Labor Day storm blew off the roof in 1998. "He came up to me and said, 'I must paint you!'" says Rile, who later modeled for Witkin's portrait of activist Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day. "I loved his stories! He told me about watching how roughly some young people were taken off a train in East Germany. I think he is very affected by what happens to other people."

At the time, Witkin was 21 years old and visiting Berlin on a Pulitzer Traveling Fellowship during the tense run-up to the Berlin Wall. For Witkin, the trip was part of "an artistic pilgrimage" that took him to Florence, Rome, and Venice, painting, studying, and meeting other artists. But it also politicized him deeply. Since then, Witkin, who turns 72 this September, has been influenced by the course of history and its unforgiving toll on others to a degree nearly unmatched by other artists of our time. Seeking out subjects that handle both artist and viewer roughly, Witkin has addressed human anguish, large scale and small: the Holocaust, Vietnam, Jesus in modern life, the Nuclear Age, political torture, and 9/11, as well as family crises, sexual intimacy, the costs of apathy, madness, and poverty. Witkin sees the artist's search as akin to that of the religious seeker. "Art and the holy are

twins," he has said, and he wishes to be remembered as a "religious painter." His technical mastery as a realist is supercharged by echoes of his youthful skirmish with abstract expressionism—he knew a number of that movement's major figures growing up in New York City—before casting his lot with the human figure. "My basic theme is our vulnerability, our most precious footing in a dangerous world," he told Sherry Chayat, author of *Life Lessons: The Art of Jerome Witkin* (Syracuse University Press, 1994; 2006).

This year, Witkin marks 40 years of teaching painting at the College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA). In celebration, the University is hosting *Drawn to Paint: The Art of Jerome Witkin*, a retrospective of those years comprising 70 works. The exhibition opens on September 8 in a dual showing at SUArt Galleries and VPA's XL Projects storefront gallery downtown (see page 30).

Reflections on Humanity in Our Time

In his foreword to Chayat's book, *San Francisco Chronicle* critic Kenneth Baker declares Witkin's "only peer" is the British figurative painter Lucian Freud, also known for discomfiting psychological depictions. "There is little optimism in Witkin's painting," Baker writes.

But in May, Witkin seemed to counter such an observation. Sitting in his backyard studio, still unable to move large canvases after recent shoulder surgery, Witkin was nearing the first an-



The Rounds Twins, Before the Camera, 2005
oil on canvas
81 x 63 inches
Jack Rutberg Fine Arts, Los Angeles



Study for the Daughters of Peter Rounds (The Twins), circa 2005
graphite, conté crayon, PrismaColor crayon and collage on paper
45.5 x 34 inches
Jack Rutberg Fine Arts, Los Angeles



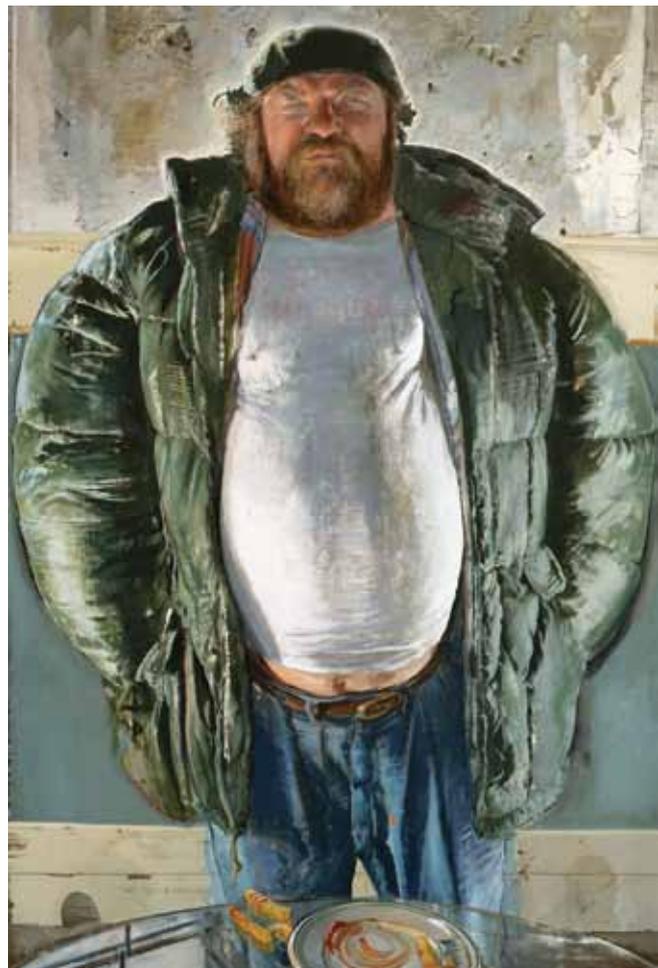
Trish Rounds, circa 2005
graphite, conté crayon, PrismaColor crayon on paper
18 x 23.5 inches
ACA Galleries, New York

niversary of his son Andrew's death at age 16 from complications of a bone marrow transplant. He recalled his own fraught relationship with his father, who had once attempted suicide. "Later, I thought, I'm not going to be someone who tries to kill themselves," he says. "I'm not going to be a self-destructive person. I'll make good—I'll make optimism work for me."

Raised in Brooklyn and Queens by his Italian Catholic mother, Witkin later found a way into his Jewish father's heritage through a series of paintings related to the Holocaust. He began the series in 1978 and pronounced it done with the six-part *Entering Darkness* in 2002. Still, *The Two of Us* followed; now, he says, he'll do one this summer about Anne Frank. "She loved movies," says Witkin, whose work is often called cinematic. He will reference Edward Hopper's painting, *New York Movie* (1939), with a diptych in which Hopper's usherette and Frank would trade places. "I'll

paint it differently than Hopper because I'll use the Landmark Theatre," he says. "That I think is my last one."

"I've heard that before," Chayat says. "He can't seem to be through with it. He feels it's the narrative that can't be told enough." About the difficulty of his son Andrew's long illness and death, she says, "His art always pulls him out." If anyone knows Witkin and his work, it's Chayat, who has covered the local arts scene for years and written for such publications as *Art in America* and *ARTNews*. She traces their relationship back to 1976, when she had just moved to Syracuse during a difficult time in her own life. Her brother had just been killed and she found solace auditing Witkin's painting course. "In that miasma of pain, grief, confusion, desolation, knowing nobody...he was just so kind," says Chayat, now abbot of the Syracuse Zen Center. "He said, 'Just come and paint.'"



Exhibition Illuminates Witkin's Creative Process

WHEN SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY premieres *Drawn to Paint: The Art of Jerome Witkin*, it will be on view at two venues from September 8 through October 23: the SUArt Galleries in the Shaffer Art Building on campus, and XL Projects, the College of Visual and Performing Arts storefront gallery downtown. Beginning in 2012, the exhibition will be available for loan. "*Drawn to Paint* will be traveling to other museums around the country during a two-year tour that will conclude at the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State in University Park, Pennsylvania," says SUArt Galleries assistant director Andrew Saluti '99, G'09.

Drawn to Paint ranges from a 1959 crayon drawing to work literally still wet during conversations for this article. It includes oils, studies for paintings, self and other portraits, and drawings. Most timely and notable may be Witkin's massive, four-panel work on 9/11, *Taken*, which opened at the Everson Museum of Art on the 2003 anniversary of the attacks. There are also a number of

portraits with local connections and some dozen pieces from Witkin's Holocaust series, including the diptych *The Two of Us, Bergen-Belson, 1945 and Israel, 1951* (2009). "We're trying to create an exhibition design that really gives the same feel for both spaces," Saluti says. "Someone seeing the show downtown wouldn't necessarily miss any of the conceptual points—narrative, academic drawing, and the artist's process—by not seeing what's in Shaffer. Obviously we'll have larger pieces that you couldn't show well in that space."

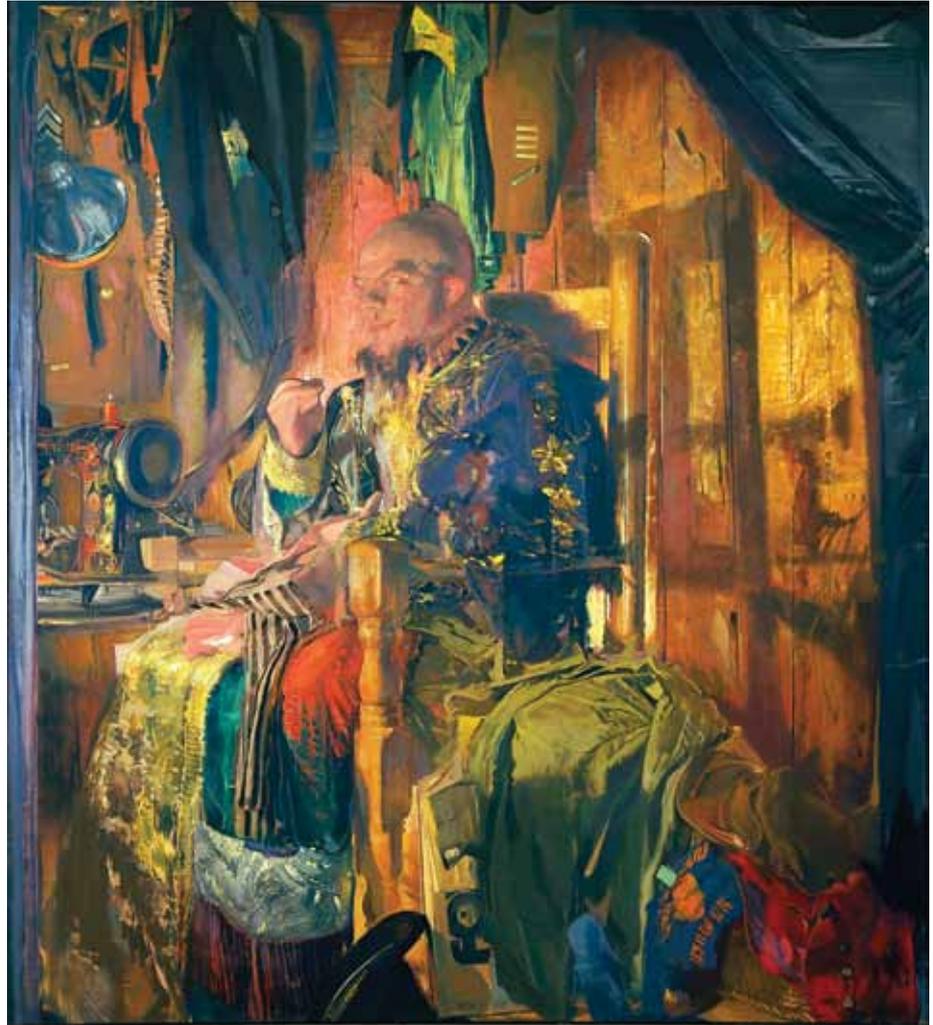
The core of the material comes from Witkin's personal collection and from his Los Angeles dealer, Jack Rutberg, but the exhibition will change as it travels. This fluid approach makes participation easier for collaborating institutions and private collectors, which number close to a dozen. "It will be dynamic," says exhibition curator Edward Aiken. Because Witkin works on such a heroic scale, Aiken says the exhibition, in part, is laying itself out in terms of running wall feet available and even doorway size. "I

expect there will be substitutions in and out," he says. "Some work that won't be shown here may be folded in on the West Coast. And the Penn State community and collectors in that area have been particularly supportive of Jerome's work, so the Palmer may show other locally held work there, too."

According to SUArt Galleries director Domenic Iacono, there's a fervent interest in this exhibition to illuminate the relationship between Witkin's drawing and painting more so than there has been previously. "Our specialty is really works on paper," he says, "so this focus also plays to the strength of the SU collection."

In addition to an extensive catalog, the exhibition will offer educational material, and a web site (suart.syr.edu/witkin) featuring images, interviews, podcasts, and a digital sketchbook that visitors can download to personal devices. "You'll be able to look through his sketchbook as you look at the painting in the gallery," Saluti says. "The unique element about this exhibition is this sense of the artist's process."

The Devil as a Tailor, 1978-79
oil on canvas
72 x 65 inches
Collection of James and
Barbara Palmer,
State College, Pa.



Opposite page (left to right):
First Study for Jeff Davies, 1979
pencil on paper
17 x 14 inches

Jeff Davies, Large than Life (Study), 1979
pencil on paper
17 x 14 inches

Jeff Davies, 1980
oil on canvas
72 x 48 inches
Palmer Museum of Art,
The Pennsylvania State University

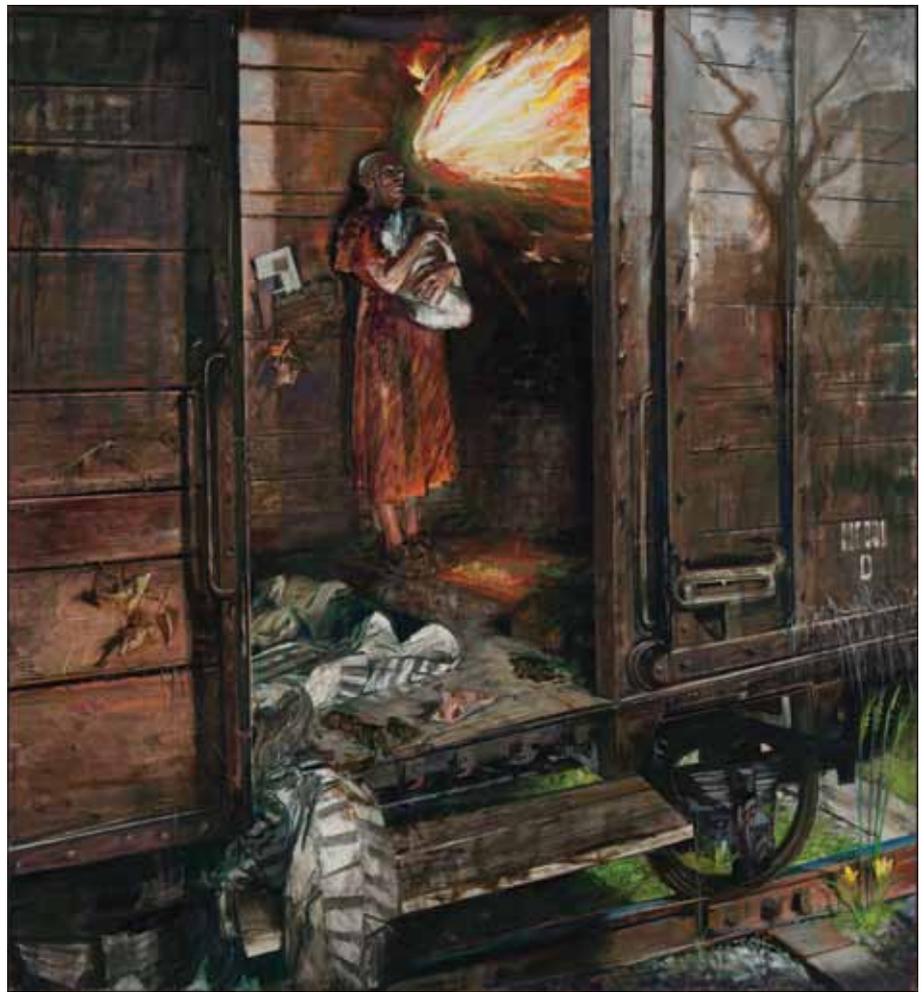


Study for Kill-Joy
(Käthe Kollwitz),
1975
pencil on paper
19 x 25.5 inches
Palmer Museum of
Art, The
Pennsylvania
State University



Kill-Joy: To the Passions of Käthe Kollwitz, 1975-76
oil on canvas
73 x 79 inches
Palmer Museum of Art,
The Pennsylvania State University

The Two of Us, Bergen-Belson, 1945 and Israel, 1951, 2009
oil on canvas
6'6" x 6' / 6'6" x 9'3"
Jack Rutberg Fine Arts,
Los Angeles



To read excerpts of a conversation with Jerome Witkin and to watch a video, go to sumagazine.syr.edu.

When Witkin arrived in Syracuse in 1971, he thought he'd only stay several years. Already he'd moved around: summer art scholarships to Skowhegan School in Maine during high school; the Pulitzer fellowship to Europe after graduating from Cooper Union in 1960, which led to a Guggenheim and a first show on return; teaching positions at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Manchester College of Art in England, and American College of Switzerland. Then, in Philadelphia, he taught at Moore College of Art while earning an M.F.A. degree at the University of Pennsylvania. Yet, Witkin says of Syracuse, "the place looked good to me." It was a large university with so many options for him. "And the thing which is good is you become Hamlet, you become isolated by the cold weather, you do your work," he says. "I can get to the city [New York] fast, and I'm represented on the West Coast by the Jack Rutberg Gallery in Los Angeles, but I think the place I really love is where I work. And this is where I did my work."

Like Chayat, SU professor Alejandro Garcia met Witkin in a painting class and friendship ensued. Garcia, who just finished his 33rd year teaching in the School of Social Work, collects

Mexican masks that he's traded with Witkin for drawings. He also posed as the Latino torturer in the graphic, deeply unsettling *Unseen and Unheard* (1986), and last winter photographed much of the work in Witkin's studio. "I admire his capacity to create great work," Garcia says, "his technical virtuosity, his themes." As an example, Garcia cites *The Screams of Kitty Genovese* (1978), which alludes indirectly to a notorious 1964 rape and fatal stabbing in a Queens alley while dozens in neighboring apartments listened and did nothing. But the painting depicts a nude woman languidly smoking in bed next to an open window. "The punch line is not obvious, and it's a beautiful painting with lace curtains blowing in a gentle breeze," Garcia says. "You ask, 'What is that about?' There's no one screaming in this painting. You have to think about it."

VPA professor Edward Aiken, head of the Graduate Program in Museum Studies and SUArt Galleries senior curator, attributes Witkin's success and longevity to his work ethic. "Jerome is always working, looking very hard at things," says Aiken, who curated the Witkin retrospective. "He's self-critical. There are flashes out there, but those who are able to sustain a career over



The Two of Us, Bergen-Belson, 1945 and Israel, 1951, 2009
oil on canvas
6'6" x 6' / 6'6" x 9'3"
Jack Rutberg Fine Arts,
Los Angeles

such a considerable time—they will flourish wherever they are.”

Aiken considers Witkin’s decision to become a figurative painter “a gutsy thing to do at that time,” he says, in light of the emphasis on abstraction and even detachment during much of the past half century among many artists and critics. “The emphasis on formalism, the anti-storytelling, the anti-narrative thrust—it was almost a tyranny. Jerome had a much larger reading of what modernism was and in retrospect their view was impoverished.”

Making Art that Matters

For his part, Witkin believes people will one day look at his work to try to understand our time. Personally, he continues to look

ahead, too. Besides working this summer on his Anne Frank painting, Witkin is planning a rare joint show with his identical twin brother, the noted photographer Joel-Peter Witkin. He says he will teach here a few more years and then his wife, Lisa, and he will see what the future holds for them.

“So many of the artist-painters have been acolytes or altar boys for what is hip or edgy and maybe looks good in art schools, but that doesn’t add up to much because they weren’t making the art, they were following the art,” Witkin says. “I like the Native American comment about dying with clean hands. In a world of compromise, I think this retrospective represents pretty clean hands. I’ve done what I wanted to do.” ◀◀