

# RYAN LEE

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## ARTNEWS

### Estate of Rudolf Baranik, Painter of Political Abstractions, Now Represented by Ryan Lee

BY *Andrew Russeth* POSTED 02/13/18 12:19 PM

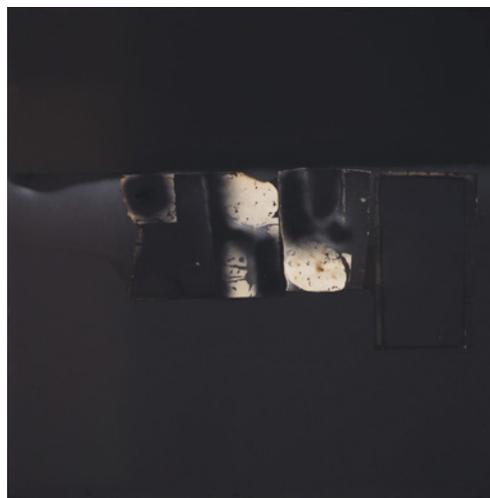
The New York gallery Ryan Lee now represents Rudolf Baranik, the painter of politically engaged abstractions who died in 1998 at the age of 77. The gallery's first Baranik show will be "Napalm Elegies," opening March 29, which takes its title from a series that the artist produced between 1967 and 1974—they're dark, brooding paintings, reminiscent of works by figures like Alberto Burri and Lee Bontecou, that feature collaged images of napalm burn victims in Vietnam War.

"We feel this is the perfect moment to reintroduce this body of work," Jeffrey Lee, a partner in the gallery, said in an interview, noting special resonance with the recent Ken Burns documentary on the Vietnam

War and a show at the New-York Historical Society on the conflict that will run through April 22. Baranik was one of the first artists to become involved in opposing the war, New York Times critic Roberta Smith noted in her obituary for the artist, and was later involved with Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America.

The Ryan Lee gallery's plan to represent Baranik came about naturally, Lee said, since it already shows the artist's wife, May Stevens, now 93, whose work takes the form of poetic and sometimes wry paintings that can also often have an incisive sociopolitical edge. (Fun fact: Baranik and Stevens had a two-person show together at P.S. 1 in Queens back in 1982 as part of a series of exhibitions called "Art Couples" that was exactly what it sounds like.)

Although Baranik's work is in the collections of institutions as august as the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum (which included it in its ongoing show "An Incomplete History of Protest"), and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, this will be his first major exhibition since 2004, when the late-lamented Jersey City Museum did a show of his "Napalm Elegies." Those on the hunt for more Baranik knowledge, take note: on May 9, at 6:30 p.m., the gallery will host a panel on Baranik at its West 26th Street home with Alejandro Anreus, Matthew Israel, Lucy Lippard, and Patricia Hills.



Rudolf Baranik, *Napalm Elegy TA 3*, 1973.  
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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At a moment when many artists are trying to expand the activist potential of their art, it does indeed feel like a moment that is ripe for revisiting Baranik's example. As Lee put it while describing the "Napalm Elegies," Baranik was using "black not purely as an aesthetic form but also as a political tool."

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## BLOUINARTINFO

### **‘An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney’s Collection, 1940–2017’ at Whitney Museum of American Art, New York** SEPTEMBER 13, 2017

In a unique exhibition the Whitney Museum of American Art is broaching the subjects of activism, protest, revolution and the role art has in each of these fields. The display, entitled ‘An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney’s Collection, 1940 – 2017’ features a selection of artists from a period of more than seventy years.

The exhibition offers a sequence of historical case studies focused on particular moments and themes. From questions of representation to the fight for civil rights, the exhibit touches upon many subjects that remain relevant today. At the root of the exhibition is the belief that artists play a profound role in transforming their time and shaping the future.

The exhibition explores how artists from the 1940s to the present have confronted the political and social issues of their respective day. Whether making art as a form of activism, criticism, instruction, or inspiration the featured artists see their work as essential to challenging established thought and creating a more equitable culture. Many have sought mediate change, such as ending the war in Vietnam or combating the AIDS crisis. Others have engaged with protest more indirectly, with the long term in mind, hoping to create new ways of imagining society and citizenship. The artists presented in the exhibition include: John Ahearn, Emma Amos, Rudolf Baranik, Andrea Bowers, Mark Bradford, AA Bronson and many more.

The exhibition is on view at Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort St, New York, NY 10014, USA.

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### A CRITICAL HISTORY OF 20TH-CENTURY ART

by Donald Kuspit  
August 9, 2006

#### Chapter 9: Aspirational Esthetics and Empathic Painting: The Search for Authenticity and the Rebellion against Conceptual Pseudo-Art: The Ninth Decade

*(excerpt)*

The abysmal black and morbid luminosity of Rudolf Baranik's *Napalm Elegies*, with their ghostly head that looks like a moonscape, makes them esthetically and existentially important, not their anti-war rhetoric. Dramatic chiaroscuro, also emblematic of annihilative anxiety, also makes May Stevens' paintings of her emotionally disturbed working class mother and the Communist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg -- they sit side by side, in different historical, social and emotional spaces -- an upsetting nightmare. Stevens' feminism and leftism seem beside the point of her poignant image, however much they inform it through her iconography. Like Baranik, Stevens transforms a traumatic, memorable photograph -- her schizophrenic mother as she looked in the mental hospital in which she spent the last two decades of her life -- into esthetically and existentially memorable art. Stevens' hallucinatory work is a human document before -- and after -- we recognize its feminist import. For Stevens, both Luxemburg and her mother were murdered by patriarchal society. But it is her esthetics that makes their lives existentially meaningful, not their tragic deaths. The bitter black atmosphere is death -- and depression -- incarnate, but it is death in general not her mother's and Luxemburg's particular deaths. A work of art is not a social statement -- it is not just another way of taking a social stand, a soapbox from which one can preach to the unconverted and indifferent -- but a dream in which the self registers through its emotions the unconscious meaning of being in a world not of its own making, the existential effects of traumatic experience that expressively linger in esthetic traces.

DONALD KUSPIT is professor of art history and philosophy at SUNY Stony Brook and A.D. White professor at large at Cornell University. His new book, *A Critical History of 20th-Century Art*, is being serially published in Artnet Magazine.

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## The New York Times

### ART REVIEW; A Painter Who Was Horrified by War, but Also Inspired by It

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

JUNE 29, 2003

APPALLED by America's carpet-bombing campaign during the Vietnam War, Rudolf Baranik spent much of the 1960's and early 1970's creating epic, visceral paintings overlaid with abstracted newspaper imagery of wartime scenes of terror -- crying children, dismembered bodies, a charred landscape. The "Napalm Elegies" are the best known of these paintings, their title inspired by his fellow American abstract painter Robert Motherwell's "Elegies to the Spanish Republic," a series of over 100 black-and-white paintings created in reaction to the Spanish Civil War.

A selection of Mr. Baranik's "Napalm Elegies" is on show at the Jersey City Museum, along with some related paintings from the period. It's the first time in a long while that works from the "Elegies" series have been shown together. Some of the paintings look a little rough around the edges, where the paint surfaces have begun to crack, but most are in excellent condition for their age. (One or two of them look as if they might have been repainted at some point). Together, they make a powerful and timely political statement about the horrors of war.

Mr. Baranik, who died in 1998, at age 78, was a Lithuanian Jew who migrated to the United States in 1938 to study. He was lucky, for two years later his family was killed during the German occupation of Lithuania, which decimated the country's large Jewish population.

This event had a profound impact on him, shaping a lifelong commitment, as a painter, to what he called "socialist formalism," and, as an activist, to social and political causes of a leftist stripe. He was involved in the civil-rights movement, numerous anti-war protests, the movement for prison reform and the push for normalization of relations with Cuba.

Mr. Baranik painted the "Elegies" between 1968 and the mid 1970's. There are around 100 paintings in the series, most of which were inspired by horrific photographs of the war in Vietnam published in newspapers during the period.

Most disturbing, for the artist, were images of the destructive force of napalm bombs dropped in unprecedented quantities on North Vietnam in an effort to kill Viet Cong soldiers hiding in the dense jungle areas of the country. The bombs did their job, but also killed or maimed thousands of innocent Vietnamese civilians.

Napalm is a highly flammable sticky jelly made from gasoline thickened with chemicals like naphthenate and palmitate, from which its name is derived. An incendiary product, it releases

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flaming splashes that set fire to anything with which they come into contact, including human flesh.

In addition to inflicting horrid burns on those in the central strike area, a napalm explosion also releases toxic gases that poison anyone in the vicinity. Those lucky enough to survive the blast, and gas, frequently suffered from permanent neurological damage, cancer and sterility.

Many of Mr. Baranik's "Elegies" contain an abstracted image of a newspaper photograph of the disembodied head of a child, its skin burnt away by a napalm blast. The image appears over and over again in his paintings -- sometimes painted, at other times collaged directly onto the canvas. Sometimes you can see it clearly, at other times it's almost imperceptible, lost in a flowing swirl of viscera and bones. But it's almost always there, somewhere, floating through the image as a metaphor for human pain, suffering and loss. It's like a memento mori.

One critic has interpreted Mr. Baranik's frequent use of the image of a child's head as a metaphor for himself, severed violently from his family and home. This interpretation has some merit, although ultimately it reduces every painting to a self-portrait.

It could be so, but might not these pictures also speak to us of the devastating consequences of conflicts waged between nations over ideological differences, or even, perhaps, of the moral burden attendant upon being a superpower citizen? I'd like to think there was more going on here than mere navel-gazing.

Most political art, as art, is mediocre and often incoherent. That's how I felt about a lot of Mr. Baranik's paintings, although I was impressed with two of them: "Napalm Elegy/White Silence (White Nights)," 1970, and "Napalm Elegy 21," 1972.

What sets these two paintings apart is a greater sense of pictorial coherency, with each standing alone as a visual image independent of their status as a political or anti-war statement. They also evoke for viewers the chilling sense of a war zone, a dark, vulnerable place where horrible things happen out of sight and out of mind.

"Rudolf Baranik: The Napalm Elegies" is at the Jersey City Museum, 350 Montgomery Street, Jersey City, through Dec. 21. Information: (201)413-0303 or [www.jerseycitymuseum.org](http://www.jerseycitymuseum.org).