

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## *JANE FREILICHER Painter Among Poets*

by David Rhodes

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Jane Freilicher remains an important figure when considering the New York poets that emerged in the mid 20th century. This exhibition gathers Freilicher's paintings and drawings, as well as two videos by Rudy Burckhardt, and features four vitrines containing photographs, book covers, letters, and manuscripts—some poems with lines crossed out and handwritten additions in the margins—that point to the interrelated friendships between painter and poets, and to the development of work at hand. There is a great deal of wit, affection, and critical exchange evident. Freilicher, now 88, was an inspiration, loyal friend, and trusted critic of many poets, in particular John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler. The exhibition is able to unfold, through so much original material, just how crucial the frequent critical dialogue and encouragement coming from Freilicher was in forming and supporting the daily lives and work of these poets.



Jane Freilicher, "Pierrot and Peonies," 2007. Oil on linen, 36 × 32". Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

Always conscious of the transient pleasures of the fugitive moment, Freilicher made paintings poignant with the passing of experience and never-to-be-retrieved time. As with Bonnard—but without that artist's languorousness—it is the detail and atmosphere of unemphasized living that is presented, explored, and valued. There is an immediacy or "quick light," as Alex Katz has described it. Some simple objects on a shelf or small table, combined with a rural vista or city view, are often enough for a subject. Take "Pierrot and Peonies," an oil painting from 2007 that breathes luminous color and delicate but pictorially precise drawing: everything brought into the picture is allowed room to maneuver, like a Polaroid that appears and continues to shift and change focus forever. The balance achieved is then left to fend for itself as Freilicher knows it can, the various parts of the painting having different degrees of definition and finish that don't require any obvious polish. The peonies of the title are partially outlined, shaded only enough for them to take shape and continue to form in one's mind. The painting features a glass vase of water in which the peonies sit, near a small image of Antoine Watteau's "Pierrot" from 1718 – 19. The water and the painting within a painting display different levels of reality: the visual

724 Fifth Avenue New York NY 10019

212 262 5050 212 262 1841 fax info@tibordenagy.com tibordenagy.com

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refraction of water making one conscious of looking through something other than air, and the image sending a reference outward from this particular painting and into another image, filtered through human consciousness and landing at another time and place. In other words, Freilicher represents an imagination at work with phenomenology and intellect, with the lightest of touches.

“Painter in the Studio” (1987) finds Freilicher behind the easel à la Velázquez, reflected in a vertical mirror positioned in the corner of a studio and flanked by windows opening onto a bucolic stretch of Long Island. The inside and outside of the room—and the real and reflected of the mirror—overlap in formal repetitions of tall rectangles, like a fugue extolling the constant two-way traffic between interior and exterior, consciousness and perception. There are portraits, paintings, and drawings of the New York poets. A pen and ink drawing of Ashbery (c. 1954) is rendered on a page torn from a spiral-bound sketchbook. It is sharp and rhythmic, thoughtful and intense like the sitter, whose gaze seems focused past the artist on some other point: an object in the room, or perhaps nothing. Every line, as well as fulfilling its role as an element in a description, is alive with the pleasure of spontaneous improvisation and invention, of making a line and moving it in search of a graphic equivalent for what is seen. In this process the drawing becomes both formally independent and psychologically perceptive. “House and Telephone Pole” (c. 1963) is made with a strong horizontal sweep of charcoal lines—the hand moving at speed from left to right and right to left in the foreground and above the houses, vegetation, and pole of the title. This swift movement recalls something seen in passing from a car, or a record of a scene made quickly before leaving. The variety of marks and smudges successfully encapsulate a glimpse of a rural or suburban group of houses, their backyards, bushes and trees, an open track in front, neglected, possibly, or not over tended.

Ashbery writes of Freilicher in the exhibition’s catalogue essay, “Her pictures always have an air of just coming into being, of tentativeness that is the lifeblood of art.” And that’s something that just can’t be affected.