

TIBOR DE NAGY

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Larry Rivers

*Works on Paper
from the 1950s and 1960s*

October 23 to November 27, 2021



Larry Rivers

Double French Money, 1962-63

mixed media

12 x 12 inches

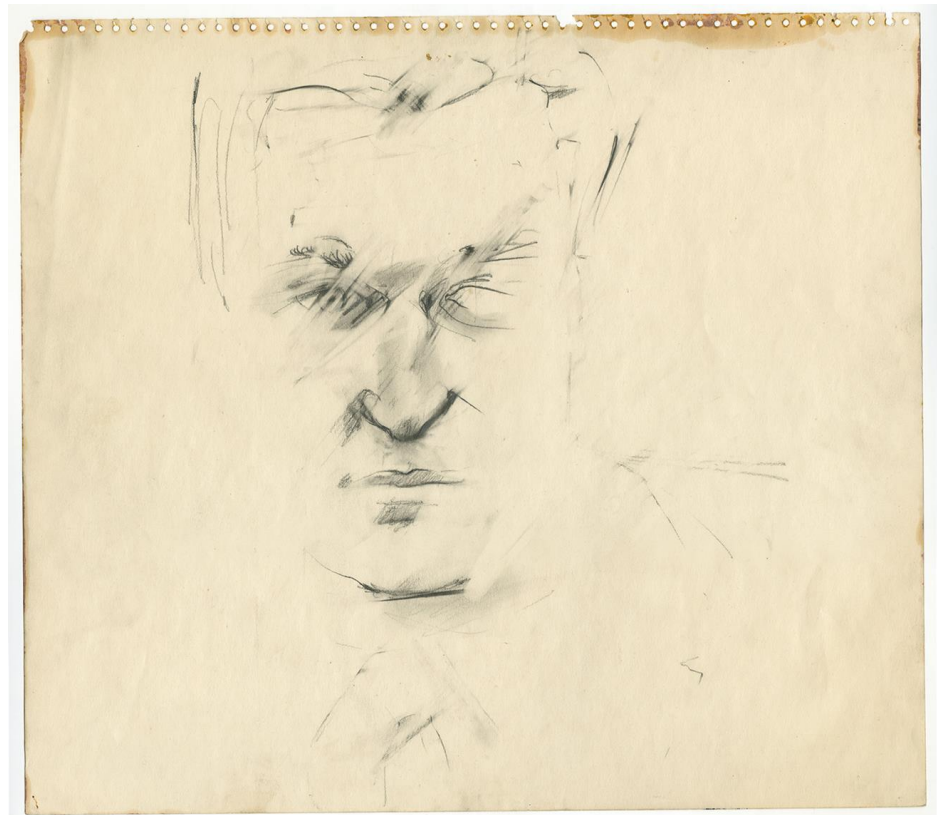
Tibor de Nagy Gallery is pleased to announce the exhibition **Larry Rivers, Works on Paper from the 1950s and 1960s**. This will be the artist's 15th solo exhibition at the gallery and the first at the gallery's 11 Rivington Street location. The exhibition is accompanied by the following essay written by David Joel, Executive Director of the Larry Rivers Foundation.

[1] *There was actual physical pleasure in drawing. Life had a purpose.* - Larry Rivers

Larry Rivers learned how to capture what he saw and put it down on paper as a student of Hans Hofmann in the late 1940s. When drawing from the model, Rivers aspired to translate the

recognizable with skills comparable to the great masters from history. He needed the drawing to validate his expectations thus proving to himself that he too could be one of the greats. Hofmann's instructions were geared towards the abstract. That combination of the artist's need to capture the figure while applying Hofmann's instructions served as the foundation for Rivers' unique blend of the recognizable and abstraction. Under Hofmann's instruction, Life Drawing, that practice of drawing from a live model was more like a disconnect from life. The nude model served to describe geometry, space [2] "Push and Pull".

Like most students learning how to draw the figure, Rivers occasionally got the proportions wrong. Hans Hoffman told Rivers, when you can't get the proportions right, tear the paper at the point it looks wrong and adjust the spacing until it looks right, then tape the paper together again. The technique appealed to him for its efficiency and speed and the lesson stayed with him his entire life. Long after Rivers no longer needed to make such crude adjustments he would still tear a drawing and tape it back together. The practice took him from two-dimensional drawing, into collage, and mixed media reliefs.



Larry Rivers

Untitled (Portrait of John Ashbery), 1962

pencil on paper

14 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches

Similarly, Rivers' drive to capture what he saw with speed and efficiency left him feeling compromised by the task of replicating all the features typically necessary for capturing a portrait. If he wanted to capture features fast, drawing two eyes would surely slow things down. So very early on in what almost seems like a literal interpretation of the phrase "look me in the eye" (not look me in the eyes), Larry began editing out the second eye. He seemed to naturally understand that when we make eye contact with another person, we can only look at one eye at a time, we can't see both eyes at the same time and yet, this monocular restriction doesn't in any way seem to impede one's ability to identify an individual's unique characteristics. So, Rivers simply left the eye out in favor of efficiency and the "push and pull" dynamic it created in the work. In very little time of course he was able to render both eyes with great speed and accuracy and we can see many examples of this but the single eye portrait had become one of his many signature features and so we see variations of it in a great percentage of his portrait drawings.

There were two central figures in Rivers' life that appear in more of his works than any other person. One was his Mother-in-law Berdie and the other was Frank O'Hara. When his mother-in-law unexpectedly passed away in 1957, the practice of rendering friends and family begin to fade into abstraction. Rivers' hand remained strong and his interpretive eye remained steadfastly literal, always drawing exactly what he saw, but without Berdie what he saw was more like the abstract sense of vacancy that comes with loss.

At this same time, there are examples where it appears that Larry was better able to articulate the detail of personal subject matter. The times that Larry seems to be able to best address the personal directly are when he has his closest friend next to him, like when he and Frank O'Hara collaborated on *Stones*, the first publication for Universal Limited Art Edition (ULAE) that they began in 1957. *Stones* is filled with references from Larry and Frank's life together, it's a lot of personal imagery, which at that time of loss in his life, Larry would not have likely addressed on his own.

Loss clearly affected changes for Larry and his art in 1957 but by the end of 1958 and the beginning of 1959, while still rendering the more abstracted figure drawings, Larry began to introduce a new kind of portraiture. He begins drafting portraits of common objects, commercial imagery or as he said [3] "images of mass production". If we look solely at the art to guide the story, it seems that after a period of grief, where imagery is miming the void in his life, Rivers begins to re-engage in the more literal art of looking. So, he turned to imagery that afforded him the same satisfaction he gained from rendering intimate portraits of family and friends, but without the risk of developing emotional attachments.

With this new source of inspiration, Rivers' art appears liberated from the trauma of loss as his visual vocabulary expands. Friends and family begin to reemerge sometimes as abstractions, sometimes as imagery connected to objects or moods, while the commercial imagery takes on all the emotional markings, smudges and erasures that were previously reserved for the more intimate renderings of those in his circle. These influential early Pop renderings caught the eye of two European gallerist's who invite Rivers to exhibit. Just as American artists are beginning to consider

a cleaner, less emotional appropriation of commercial imagery, Rivers moves to France, where the more pointed, socially and politically minded Nouveau Réalistes' are quick to welcome Rivers into their circle. After a successful year in Europe, Rivers returns to America, where he continued to cut his own path, at times leveraging the Nouveau Réalisme sensibilities against the blossoming tenets of American Pop Art.

David Joel

Executive Director of the Larry Rivers Foundation

[1] What did I do? Larry Rivers with Arnold Weinstein. Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. 1992. Page 120

[2] "Push and Pull" was an instructive term that Hans Hofmann often used when explaining compositional dynamics.

[3] A Statement read to the International Association of Plastic Arts by Larry Rivers at the Museum of Modern Art Symposium on "Mass Culture & the Artist". New York. October 8th, 1963