



Jack Youngerman and his son Milo in the artist's Bridgehampton studio

Morgan McGovern

For Jack Youngerman, 'It's Always New'

BY MARK SEGAL

After 60 years of making and exhibiting art, Jack Youngerman shows no sign of slowing down. On a recent wintry morning he led a visitor briskly across hard-packed, slippery snow from his house on Scuttlehole Road in Bridgehampton, where he has lived since 1968, to his studio.

He is one of the very few American artists — Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns, and Frank Stella are the others — who have cast long shadows across the art world since the 1950s and continue to do so. All four were selected by Dorothy Miller, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, for its landmark 1959 exhibition "16 Americans," which also included Alfred Leslie, Robert Rauschenberg, and Louise Nevelson.

"You have to realize that in New York at that time Abstract Expressionism, and especially the work of Pollock and de Kooning, was considered by most people to be what painting was and would be far into the future." He singled out Kelly and Rauschenberg in particular, who, "in the midst of all that painterliness, pointed in new directions."

The road that led to more than 50 solo shows, including a retrospective at the Guggenheim in 1986, began in the Midwest at a time when "being an artist wasn't among the human possibilities for me. Artists were people who lived in Europe 300 years ago."

Mr. Youngerman was born in St. Louis in 1926 and moved to Kentucky three years later. "When I was growing up, there were no illustrated art books as we



"Suspensus," a 2010 painting in oil on Baltic birch plywood
Gary Mamay

now know them," he said. "In my family we not only had no art books, but virtually no literature at all. My mother was an intelligent woman who could have done anything I've done if she'd only had the opportunity."

The artist attended the University of Missouri, where he majored in journalism. While there, he took an art class. "We drew clothed models, male and female. Nude models weren't an option in those days, at least not in Missouri."

Toward the end of World War II he entered a naval officers training program and was commissioned in December 1946. "I didn't exactly help win the war," he said with a smile, "but while I was in the Navy I went on leave to Washington, D.C., so I could visit the National Gallery and see these things everybody made such a big deal about."

En route to Paris in 1947 to enroll at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, he stopped in Manhattan and visited MoMA. "That was the first time I had seen any modern and contemporary art at all. I actually tried to enroll at the Art Students League first, but they had no room, since there were so many ex-G.I.s back in school on the G.I. Bill."

When Mr. Youngerman first arrived in Paris, he was working figuratively. "I encountered not just modern art but all of art simultaneously, including prehistoric, Romanesque, Gothic, and Renaissance." By 1949, he had abandoned figurative painting. A painting on plywood from that year consists of white and black geometric shapes interspersed with finely drawn crosses and brings to mind the work of Paul Klee.

By 1951, Mr. Youngerman was painting hard-edged abstractions that look contemporary even today.

"I feel like I went into abstraction too soon," he mused. "I have a kind of nostalgia for the figurative paintings I didn't make. I would have liked at least a few years of 20th-century realism." While in Paris, he formed a friendship with Ellsworth Kelly, who was a

Continued on C2



"Black Juba," a cast fiberglass sculpture installed at the LongHouse Reserve in 2013
Laurie Lambrecht

Jack Youngerman

Continued from C1
student at the same school, and together they visited the studios of Brancusi and Jean Arp.

Like many art students, he made copies in the Louvre. "I did a copy of a Goya portrait that I still have and a Cezanne still life. It was very interesting for me to do a copy of a Goya, because it demystified technique for me. When you look at those paintings you can't imagine how they physically proceeded to get the results they did. Making copies showed me that I, an ordinary person, could paint in a manner that approached the way they painted."

During this time Mr. Youngerman also made a pilgrimage to the newly opened caves at Lascaux and traveled

extensively in the Middle East while visiting his father-in-law, Henri Seyrig, an archeologist living in Beirut. In Paris, he became interested in the resurgence of geometric abstraction, and saw recent works by Matisse at the Salon de Mai. Other influences from this period included posters by Toulouse-Lautrec, 19th-century Japanese woodcuts, and woodcuts by Kandinsky and Arp.

Asked how aware he was while in France of the ascendance of the New York School, Mr. Youngerman said he saw his first ArtNews magazine at an American library on the Boulevard St. Germain. In a Parisian gallery in 1955, he encountered the work of Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman for the first time. "By the mid-1950s I was more and more curious about what was going on in New York. I hadn't even visited during the nine years I had been away."

Mr. Youngerman returned to the city in 1956 with his wife, Delphine Seyrig, a French actress who later starred in "Last Year at Marienbad," and their son, Duncan, born earlier that year, now a composer and musician living in France. Another son, Milo, whose mother is Hilary Helfant, was born in 2000 and attends the Bridgehampton School.

"I had lived in Paris for so long, I've never had this Paris nostalgia. Nine years is like a marriage, and after a couple of years you get over the honeymoon. One of the main things I got from living early on in Paris, from the age of 21 to 30, is that it enabled me to see my own country and, more importantly, to appreciate it. When I came back I understood almost immediately what I think of as the unique American quality — a kind of openness, a non-stratified openness."

His friend Ellsworth Kelly, who had returned to New York in 1954, was living in a downtown loft on Coenties Slip. "He showed me around and told me about a house that we rented. Then I met Bob Indiana, who was a friend of Ellsworth's, and Agnes Martin, and Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, who lived a few blocks away."

Mr. Youngerman recalled the last time he saw Johns and Rauschenberg together. They were sitting on the floor with Cy Twombly, cutting out pieces of aluminum for a display window at Bonwit Teller. "That was how Rauschenberg supported himself. It's amazing that within a few weeks of my return I met all the people who were on art's leading edge," also among them John Cage and Merce Cunningham. Rauschenberg would visit Cage and Cunningham's apartment on Riverside Drive to shower.

It didn't take long for Mr. Youngerman to establish himself in New York's art world. He had the first of seven solo exhibitions at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1958, and later that year was included in the Carnegie Institute International. "16 Americans" took place the following year. Since then he has been included

in exhibitions and the collections of some of the most important arts institutions in the world and has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and many others.

He returned to Europe with Delphine and Duncan in the fall of 1960 for the filming of "Last Year at Marienbad." "Not long after, Delphine realized that her place was in Paris and I realized that mine was in New York. We were both fortunate in the way it worked out, but it is difficult when you have a child. The arts are so demanding and so all-encompassing that it makes it very hard for the parent and especially hard for the child."

After they separated, Duncan went to school in France. Mr. Youngerman would visit him during the year, and he came to America during the summers. "One summer I spent with him in my loft in New York, and it was difficult for him. So after that I started coming out to the Hamptons, where Ellsworth had a home. I rented out here for several summers, but I wanted a real workplace, so I bought this house and studio in 1968. Even when I was living in New York I had strong connections with people out here. This for me is home."

Last summer, LongHouse Reserve in East Hampton exhibited seven of Mr. Youngerman's fiberglass sculptures. The white and black resin pieces, which were created in the 1980s at the Bridgehampton studio, result from the transformation, via simple torsion, of a flat rectangle into compound curving forms. "Each one started with a rectangle," he explained. "I improvised with screens, foam, fiberglass, and resin, and I used cords to tie them up. These were my only sculptures not preceded by sketches. I knew what I was hoping for, but I had no idea what the outcome would be until I worked with the materials."

Regarding the construction of his intricately cut and layered wood reliefs, Mr. Youngerman said, "You need the proper equipment, the proper place, and the proper experience and know-how. Even cutting flat sheets of plywood requires extraordinary tools and a tremendous amount of skill. Most of my work in wood I did with the great help of Warren Padula, who is an amazing craftsman. He did all the cutting and gluing, but everything else had to be done by me here in the studio, including the conception."

Bridgehampton, like everywhere else on the East End, has changed over the past 45 years, but the artist is fortunate, he said, to still be surrounded by horse farms, nurseries, and vineyards. He works every day. "Sometimes I start late, sometimes I work late, sometimes I work on weekends, but I try to get in my 40 hours a week. Work is a saving grace. If I have one thing to be grateful for it's that from almost the beginning I had something I loved to do every day. It's always new, every day is new, and that's where the satisfaction lies."