Robert Natkin and Judith Dolnick

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Robert Natkin & Judith Dolnick
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EDWARD HOPPER HOUSE ART CENTER
Robert Natkin (1930-2010) and Judith Dolnick (b. 1933) painted side by side in a shared studio for nearly sixty years. They were partners not only in marriage, but also aesthetic compatriots, much like Edward Hopper and his wife and fellow painter, Josephine Nivison.

Both born in Chicago, Natkin and Dolnick began their artistic careers there before relocating to New York in 1959. Disenchanted by the New York art scene, they retreated in the late 1960s to rural Connecticut, where they each continued, until Natkin’s death, to explore highly personal approaches to visual narrative.

Edward Hopper spoke often of the artist’s “inner life,” also referred to by Natkin as the painter’s “landscape of emotion.” Despite shared passions for Cézanne, Bonnard, and DeKooning, Natkin and Dolnick used the same palette of acrylic paints to create very different visual landscapes. Natkin’s paintings, on the one hand, rely on textured planes of seemingly shifting veils of color. His canvases are punctuated by arresting shapes, which either hover precariously on the painting’s surface or lurk beneath undulating planes of meshed color. Dolnick’s canvases, on the other hand, are pellucid near water-scape, inhabited by floating and clustered coral-like forms.

What Natkin and Dolnick shared throughout more than half a century of aesthetic dialogue and marriage, was a refusal to give in to the vagaries of the art world and the whims of critics. Indeed, art that is beautiful and pleasing to what Natkin often referred to as the “tongue of the eye” does not mean art that is simplistic. What they revered, above all, was beauty and “painterliness.” As Dolnick asserted in a recent interview, “Difficult art can be beautiful.” Just as Van Gogh was able, with his paintbrush, to transform a battered pair of boots into a quietly serene yet searing image, Natkin and Dolnick adhered to their own respective personal lexicons to create abstract visions that are both powerful and yet intensely lyrical.

The advent of Pop Art in the 1960s unleashed a backlash against an established aesthetic paradigm based on beauty. Video installations and high concept pieces soon took center stage in both museums and auction houses, and “beauty” became a dirty word in the art world. Nevertheless, Natkin and Dolnick, in their Redding, CT, studio, continued to celebrate form, gesture, and color, exploring the realms of abstraction through the creation of evocative works that were shamelessly beautiful. Natkin’s works are quietly bold. Dolnick’s, one could say, are boldly quiet. Side by side, these canvases are timeless celebrations of visual narrative.

Leda Natkin Nelis