

## Rediscovering Edward Melcarth, a Gay, Communist Visionary

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LEXINGTON, Kentucky — Oblivion is a very lonely place in which to spend eternity.

It's also a destination that many artists who take their work seriously, thinking ahead to the long stretch of posterity, would very much like to avoid.

Fortunately, in recent decades a growing number of art historians, employing research and analytical approaches influenced by feminist and postmodernist critical thinking, have dug back into Western art history's familiar canon to shine long-overdue light on certain forgotten or overlooked artists from different periods, including those from some of modernism's best-known eras. Often these researchers have called attention to innovative contributions to modern art's evolution from non-white, non-hetero, or female artists.

Looking back, it appears that the Kentucky-born artist Edward Melcarth (1914-1973), who dared to live as an openly homosexual man and did not hide his support for communism, did not earn a significant place in modern art's canonical history for exactly those reasons. His achievements were also overshadowed by the art establishment's preoccupation with Abstract Expressionism, whose rise coincided with Melcarth's development of his own personal, mature artistic language.

Melcarth's work is now the subject of two illuminating exhibitions in Lexington, *Edward Melcarth: Points of View*, a mini-survey of his oeuvre on view at the University of Kentucky Art Museum (through April 8), and *Edward Melcarth: Rough Trade*, a selection of portraits on display through February 17 at Institute 193, a small, independent arts center whose programming focuses on cultural figures with strong ties to Kentucky or the southeastern United States.

How or why did Melcarth disappear from — or never fully gain entrance to — the annals of modern art? Never mind that he was active on New York's burgeoning, post-World War II art scene; his work was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1940s and at Manhattan galleries over a decades-long timespan, and he knew just about everyone: Peggy Guggenheim (for whom he designed a famous pair of bat-shaped sunglasses); Tennessee Williams; Gore Vidal; and the multimillionaire art collector and Forbes magazine publisher, Malcolm Forbes; his circle also included many other artists as well as countless, now nameless hustlers, sailors, beach bums, and representatives of working-class "trade" who posed for his pictures and with whom he had sex.

Perhaps the transgression that most likely explains Melcarth's exclusion from the abstraction-focused art history of his time was the fact that he was an avid figurative painter — an enthusiastic depicter of the male face and body, subjects he often eroticized in compositions whose structures can appear as sophisticated and dynamic as



Edward Melcarth, "Junkie with Open Shirt" (no date), oil on canvas, 40.5 x 30.25 inches, The Forbes Collection (photo courtesy of University of Kentucky Art Museum)

their emotional-psychological atmospheres can feel strangely ambiguous. With his solid understanding of art history and fine drawing skills, Melcarth celebrated paganism and bemoaned modern art's banishment of the human body as a central theme.

Melcarth was born Edward Epstein to Jewish parents in Louisville in 1914. After his father died, his mother, whose family discouraged her from becoming an opera singer, remarried a wealthy British aristocrat. Edward, who would reject religion and change his surname to that of an ancient Phoenician god, was educated in London and at Harvard University; later he studied art in Boston with the German-born painter Karl Zerbe.

In an interview in Lexington last week, the historian Jonathan Coleman, a former teacher of gender studies at the University of Kentucky and the founding director of the locally based Faulkner Morgan Archive, noted, "Melcarth was in Europe in the late 1930s, where, in Venice, he saw a Tintoretto exhibition that, for a young artist who had worked his way through Cubism, came as an epiphany; in his own art, he crafted a vision of a world that perhaps was too beautiful to exist. With their idealized male bodies and often large formats, his paintings represented what he called 'Social Romanticism.'"



The artist Edward Melcarth at work in 1950; location and photographer unknown (photo courtesy of the Faulkner Morgan Archive)

Melcarth once stated that "Social Romanticism attempts to describe man's idealized view of himself using the techniques closer to the Renaissance"; it took ordinary subjects and rendered them "extraordinary." He added, "There can be no separation between form and content[;] the two are one."

Coleman, who wrote his University of Kentucky doctoral dissertation about same-sex prostitution in London from 1885 to 1957, oversees an archive named for the gay, Kentucky-born artists Henry Faulkner (1924-1981) and his student, Robert Morgan. Faulkner, a close pal (and maybe also a lover) of the playwright Tennessee Williams, made colorful, stylized still lifes and was known for turning up at art shows with a bourbon-drinking goat. Morgan, who was born in 1950, makes mixed-media assemblages, some of which have incorporated photographs and personal mementos from young gay men who were the victims of AIDS, alcoholism, or drug abuse. The archive houses Faulkner's and Morgan's personal papers, photos, and gay-related miscellanea; its mission, Coleman explained, is to document the contributions to Kentucky's history, culture, and society of LGBT persons who would otherwise be written out of the region's mainstream history.

Coleman's research has shown that Melcarth, Faulkner, and the photographer Thomas Painter lived together in New York for some time during the decades following WWII. They shared friends, artistic interests — and sexual partners, too. Coleman said, "Painter was one of the research subjects who provided testimonials about his own and his homosexual associates' sexual activities to the pioneering sexologist Alfred Kinsey. His reports were detailed, and from them one can learn something about Melcarth, whose appetite for sex was rapacious."



Edward Melcarth, "Danaë with OD and Cat" (no date), oil on canvas, 50 x 77.5 inches, The Forbes Collection (photo courtesy of University of Kentucky Art Museum)

The faces of several of the hustlers, blue-collar workers, and other acquaintances who posed for Melcarth and presumably also kept his bed warm are the subjects of the mostly small-format, oil-on-canvas paintings on view at Institute 193. Its director, Paul Brown, said, “They complement the larger, complex compositions in the university’s show, capturing a range of emotions in the male face.” Melcarth’s men can be rugged or pretty, or, as Brown noted, “both at the same time” as the artist simultaneously renders accurate likenesses of his subjects and idealizes the features that attracted him in the first place.

From 1941, “Standing Man with Open Shirt,” the only dated work on view, shows a tall figure with a long neck and a narrow head with a downcast, pensive gaze. In “Portrait of Blond Youth in Turquoise Jacket,” a young man with rock-star hair looks away, distracted or lost in thought, while in “Blond Youth with Brown Jacket,” a more preppy type twists back to face the viewer. In these and other paintings, Melcarth’s men seem to guard their secrets while oozing a detached air that is more chilly-mysterious than come-hither sexy. “The Hanging,” the most unusual picture here, is far from erotic. Like a bizarre, inexplicable slice of Southern Gothic, it depicts, in the shadows, a blindfolded, apparently light-skinned man in a long, white nightshirt, his trousers pulled down to expose his genitals, hanging from a noose attached to a leafy tree branch. (Does it depict the actual or imagined lynching of a homosexual man?)

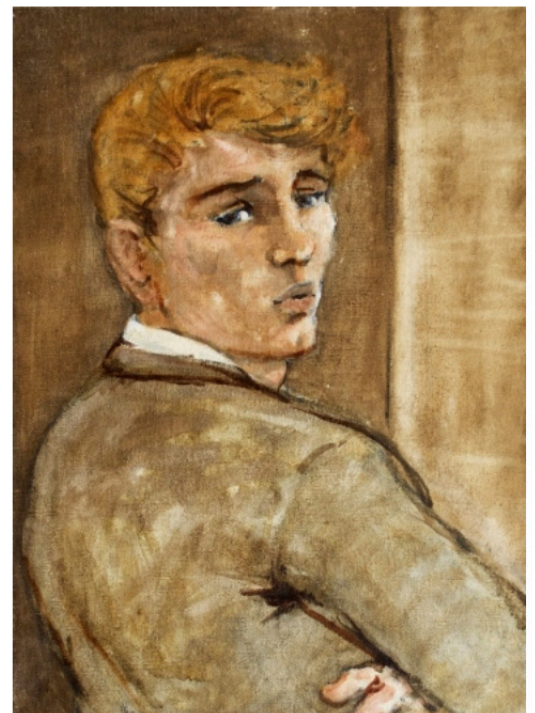
At the University of Kentucky’s museum, oil paintings of varying sizes, along with a few sculptural pieces (none of which are dated), demonstrate Melcarth’s range — as well as the sometimes mystifying singularity of his artistic vision. What is a viewer to make, for example, of his take on the Greek myth of Danaë, whose father, a king, locked her up to prevent her from becoming pregnant in an effort to defy a prediction that he would be killed by a grandson? Here, Danaë appears as a world-weary odalisque attended by a feline companion (Melcarth loved cats) while a man seated beside her shoots up heroin.

In “Rape of the Sabines,” Melcarth’s interpretation of another mythological tale, in which men from ancient Rome, in search of wives, abducted women from other places, the painter portrays a storm of hunky male bodies crashing through a fence and spilling across the pictorial space with all the athleticism and spunk of a West Side Story production number. In the long, vertical “Untitled (Bather),” the viewer’s eyes go straight to the back side of a standing, bikini-clad woman on a beach, only to move unstoppably upward to a boardwalk scene, in which a sailor in his white uniform approaches another young man seated on a bench. Melcarth obscures all of his subjects’ faces, but his tightly composed picture is all irrepressible ogling and desire.

His masterwork here, though, is his “Last Supper,” in which the old Christian story is set at the counter of a diner. In this long, horizontal composition, the arms of handsome men reach out in a tussle to grab doughnuts or touch a muscled server — who just might be the figure of Jesus Christ with his face turned away — in counterpoint to shafts of light piercing the narrow space they all occupy. Where is Judas? Is he the fellow in a white cap, seen from



Edward Melcarth, “Portrait of Blond Youth in Turquoise Jacket” (no date), oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches, The Forbes Collection (photo courtesy of Institute 193)



Edward Melcarth, “Blond Youth with Brown Jacket” (no date), oil on canvas, 22 x 16 inches, The Forbes Collection (photo courtesy of Institute 193)

the back, or a nearby, standing comrade, whose face is buried in a newspaper?

In the late 1960s, Melcarth left New York and settled in Venice, where he focused on making sculpture and died in 1973. At some point during his New York years, he had met Malcolm Forbes, who became a regular collector-patron and, after Melcarth's death, acquired a large quantity of his works. It is from the Forbes family's holdings that the current exhibitions have been assembled. (After Forbes died in 1990, it became publicly known that he had lived as a closeted gay man. His written correspondence with Melcarth was friendly and cordial, and mainly concerned his purchases of the artist's works. What, if any, gossip about New York's gay demi-monde they might have shared remains the stuff of speculation.)

These two exhibitions, backed by Coleman's ongoing research, suggest that Melcarth's work may begin to enjoy a period of deserved rediscovery. If so, as the University of Kentucky Art Museum's director Stuart Horodner told me, "It's kind of a backward process we're witnessing, but that's okay; for instead of presenting a hitherto overlooked body of work with all the relevant scholarship already done, we're putting it out there first, complete with many unanswered questions, in the hopes of attracting researchers and stimulating the public. This work is exciting and feels relevant to many of today's concerns."

Certainly Melcarth's vision of an art celebrating the human form and the passions that fuel it will give art historians something that should be examined on its own terms, and not in a context set by the booze-soaked, paint-flinging experiments of torturous, Ab-Ex angst. As Melcarth's art of sex, sensuality, erotic fantasy, and yearning enters the history book, it could very well burn up its pages.

Edward Melcarth: Rough Trade continues at Institute 193 (193 North Limestone Street, Lexington, Kentucky) through February 17; Edward Melcarth: Points of View continues at the University of Kentucky Art Museum (405 Rose Street, Lexington) through April 8.



Edward Melcarth, "Rape of the Sabines" (no date), oil on canvas, 60 x 85.5 inches, Collection of Steve Forbes (photo courtesy of University of Kentucky Art Museum)