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*An Exhibition Organized  
by the  
San Francisco Museum of Art*

# Robert Natkin

*San Francisco Museum of Art  
San Francisco, California  
September 25 - November 9, 1969*

*The Laguna Beach Art Association Gallery  
Laguna Beach, California  
February 1 - February 28, 1970*

## Acknowledgements

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My appreciation to those staff members who have helped in the preparation of the exhibition and the catalogue: Mrs. Theresa Pennuto, Registrar; Mrs. Gabrielle Kartzian has provided assistance with the manuscript, loans and the catalogue listing. Mr. Duane Faubion has provided all photographs.

G. N.

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# Robert Natkin

One of Robert Natkin's earliest memories comes from a dream in his childhood. It is a persistent and recurring dream that he often recalls of diving into a beautiful oriental rug in his home, floating down in slow motion past beautiful shapes, rich colors, exotic floral-faunal forms, passing through the mesh of underwater rainbows. It was an experience of surpassing beauty for the boy and one that perhaps he is still trying to capture in his painting. It could have influenced him in choosing the life of an artist. Natkin cannot remember a period when he did not intend to become a painter. He recalls discovering a reproduction of an odalisque by Matisse in grade school. The composition, tied together by interlocking decorative patterns, is still fresh in his mind. One of the memorable events of his high school years was when a student at the Institute of Design introduced him to the work of Paul Klee through a volume of reproductions. Natkin remembers being enthralled—"It was the most natural work I'd ever seen."

All of Natkin's grandparents were Russian-Jewish emigres. Born in Chicago in 1930, he recalls his family as divided between the "crazy, open rebels" of his father's side and the "religious, salesmen bourgeois" of his mother's side. Political radicalism, social idealism and respect for individualism warred constantly with conventional religious feeling and severe repression in a stormy family life. Upon completing high school he went directly into the art school of the Art Institute of Chicago cutting classes to spend time with the works of art in the Museum upstairs. He wasn't interested in art history but he was intoxicated by the works themselves. He could only learn from seeing the works—not from reading about them. As a result of his time in the Art Institute galleries, he developed some powerful enthusiasms for the post-impressionists—Seurat, Gauguin and especially Cezanne—and for Chardin, Goya and Velasquez through reproduction. He became aware of Chagall, responding to the artist's "beautiful, natural painterliness."

During his art school career a number of works and exhibitions took on the significance of revelation for the young artist. Perhaps most important was the Art Institute's exhibition and purchase of Willem de Kooning's *Excavation*. It was a tremendously exciting painting to the young artist, but it was troublesome and he couldn't understand how it was painted or what it meant. It is likely that the artist's concept that a painting must unfold its meaning to a viewer over a period of time may owe its beginnings to the experience of that work. Another show of great meaning to Natkin featured the great color fields of Mark Rothko. "A whole painting seemed to

turn into a hum of light," he recalls. He loved the work but it didn't lead him to his own discoveries. The Modigliani-Soutine show held in Cleveland was another crucial event. Natkin had looked forward to studying the Modiglianis with their hints of Cubism and their renaissance linearity. His surprise lay in the anguished, passionate, bravura handling of paint and the clangorous color to be found in the Soutine landscapes and portraits.

During his school years and immediately afterwards, the young artist spent a great deal of time simply finding out about things—the Matisse *Bathers*, the Seurat *Grande Jatte*, the many Cezanne paintings in the Art Institute. He came to feel that "Since Cezanne, the development of art amalgamating these two traditions (the decorative and the illusionist) has led to the emergence of new pictorial order yielding great concrete beauty . . ." <sup>(1)</sup> The illusion of three dimensionality within the flat planar handling of color by Cezanne became an important element in Natkin's thinking. Elsewhere—at the Field Museum mostly—he looked at primitive art, especially American Indian paintings and Peruvian textiles. He has always been very reverent about art; he admires a broad variety of art forms outside of the traditional easel painting convention. He responds warmly to architectural details in Louis Sullivan's buildings and drawings; he is enthusiastic about the stained and leaded glass windows of Frank Lloyd Wright's early buildings. "My art is born equally from two great visual traditions. The oldest and most universal of these, the architectural or decorative style enhances almost all visual cultures. The illusionist tradition is unique to art. It is a much younger tradition. The illusionist style developed not only because of the philosophy of the Renaissance man, but also because of the amazing possibilities . . . of oil paint." <sup>(2)</sup>

Portrait painting became an aspect of Natkin's practice in the early fifties, and he took as his models 'Rose Period' Picasso, Rembrandt, Soutine and the gummy virtuoso painting of the abstract expressionists. Some of his portraits were of close friends, but many were imaginary persons. Shortly after graduating from the Art Institute in 1952 the artist spent four months in New York City. The New York School was impressive but he did not feel adequate to the challenges of living in New York. The following year he spent a few months in San Francisco, convinced that the prime cities in the U.S. art world were New York, Chicago and San Francisco. He associated San Francisco with Mark Rothko and he hoped that he would want to live there. He came to feel that San Franciscans had too much fun and that he wasn't right for the city. Again he returned to Chicago.



For the next three years the painter worked hard trying to digest his discoveries, his enthusiasms and his art school training. He came to feel by 1956 that he had achieved something of a personal amalgam of these forces. He had adopted a number of teachers who hadn't been on the Art Institute faculty—Paul Klee, Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse and Georges Seurat among them. He had been impressed by the Richard Diebenkorn show at the Frumkin Gallery, Chicago. It was under such influences that his first mature painting began to take form. The paintings were large, violently expressionist abstractions, extremely colorful. Works like the *Polish Rider*, 1958, showed an awareness of de Kooning. Dore Ashton described these paintings as "... visibly conditioned by orthodox abstract expressionist formulae. They were excessively large, contained an over-abundance of loosely defined forms which wandered freely in unlimited space, and seemed to be proving grounds for several styles. But there was something insistently rebellious about them. Close study brought out Natkin's skillful manipulations of odd color harmonies and his careful adjustment of light values."<sup>(3)</sup> They were tough, energetic, committed paintings, with extremely rich, "oriental" color and a commanding intensity. Works like *The Heart*, 1959 and *Pharaoh*, 1959, lend insight to Natkin's development in these years. In the former he began to show an interest in paint quality without the utilization of impasto, as he did also in *Summer*, of the same year.

In 1957 Natkin married Judith Dolnick (also a painter) and they honeymooned in New York City. After returning to Chicago they elected to remain, challenging the city on its own terms. Natkin determined to open a gallery and provide a showcase for himself and other artists of his acquaintance. Taking as a partner his friend Stanley Sourelis, a chemical engineer and serious painting student, Natkin rented a vacant store front at 1339 North Wells Street on Chicago's near North side. The flyer for the August opening of the Wells Street Gallery listed among the gallery group, Richard Bogart, Paul Campagna, John Chamberlain, Ernest Dieringer, Judith Dolnick, Ronald Slowinski, Gerald van de Wiele and Donald Vlack. The gallery received liberal publicity from the *Daily News* and the *Tribune*. The need for a gallery devoted to younger Chicagoans of an experimental nature was readily appreciated by the press if not by the community. Natkin acknowledges the influence of Judith Natkin's work on his watercolor style and the influence of Ron Slowinski's paintings on his later architectural mode.

The pattern of the gallery's exhibitions was dominated by one-man and two-man shows of the original roster, but oc-

casional group shows varied the schedule. An Aaron Siskind photography show and an architectural exhibition brought new audiences to the gallery. In September, 1958, beginning its second year, the Wells Street Gallery staged a loan show of several works each by Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and Arshile Gorky, plus one work each by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and David Smith, for a headline show of New York School artists. During the second year Natkin converted the gallery to a cooperative enterprise and before the year ended even that effort proved too much for the gallant band of young artists. The Wells Street Gallery closed early in 1959, with sympathetic obituaries from all sides.

Natkin had found the Chicago years discouraging. With the exciting but empty experience of the gallery behind him, he now felt it was time to assault New York. Now the Whitney Museum had invited him to participate in the *Americans Under 35* exhibition, he was scheduled for inclusion in a group show at the Alan Gallery, New York, and indications were that he might expect to show with the Poindexter Gallery later in the year. He felt it was time to leave his home town.

Since his first encounter with the New York School as a student, Natkin had felt close to its inspiration. Some artists, like de Kooning, Philip Guston and Rothko seemed like ancestors to the young painter. He felt that the attitudes of abstract expressionism had been specially significant in his personal development. In particular he felt obligated for the awareness that the process of making a painting could be part of the style of the finished work. His go-for-broke period of expressionist painting occurred at a crucial time in his development and influenced his education dramatically. Therefore he expected on going to New York to be identified with the movement and to find his own place in it. Instead Natkin found himself put off by the bohemianism and band-wagon conformity of the artists of his own generation. He found himself avoiding the Village hangouts that he might have been expected to frequent. He turned almost automatically to the Metropolitan Museum rather than to the Modern and the uptown galleries. For variety the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of the American Indian provided sustenance. His work in New York first returned to the loose composition of earlier work but it soon firmed up, taking on a bolder, clearer organization with more fully defined forms and saturated colors, often composed in slender vertical elements or in tondo-form canvases. Rich scumbles and shine-through brushwork became the rule, often in compositions which seemed to suggest screens, windows, or doorways to light-filled patios.

Rich detail, small forms, repetition and glowing color became his hallmark.

In December 1959 and 1961 he held one-man shows at the Poindexter Gallery. With that recognition came a number of invitations, a one-man show at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, a new talent show at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, an invitation to the Pennsylvania Academy Annual. The incentive of the recognition, exhibitions and invitations made it possible for the artist to accelerate his development.

The Apollo series began in 1962 and has continued until this writing in mid-1969. It is characterized by the vertical bands of brushed or knifed color, thick and thin, jeweled and textured. They are sunny paintings, filled with detail and variety, revealing themselves slowly to continued study. Apollo, the Greek God of Poetry and Light, is invoked for the sun-drenched and lyrical overtones of his name. *Egypt Smile*, 1962, the earliest Apollo painting in the exhibition, utilizes a bewildering number of vertical courses in yellows, blues and greens with pinks and reds glowing under transparent films of neutral tones. The whole canvas vibrates with a color energy that is characteristic of the series. *Othello*, 1963, New York University's Apollo, is distinguished by areas of greater opacity, a quality of broad pointillism and great variety in application of pigment. New uses of texture, cross-hatching, selective blotting, dry brush modeling of areas, are all brought into use to achieve openness, color vitality, and richness of detail in later works in the series. The entire surface of the canvas can seem to turn into an illusionary veil of light screening out a Bonnard-like veranda. Others, more opaque, have the richness of oriental rugs, moving always toward ever more complex interaction of color.

The Apollo series is the center of Natkin's work and his development as a painter. It is a romantic impressionism, which owes a great deal to the heightened brilliance of late Bonnard. At the same time the Apollos have influenced the development of two new directions in the painter's work: one more formal, highly organized and decorative; the other more informal, free and improvisational in nature. The first, more decorative development may be called the Architectural Style. Again, the series is characterized by clusters of vertical bands, united into design elements. Many of these vertical clusters of related bands are broken rhythmically by repeated horizontal elements. Other vertical clusters may be handled as a single color, or as a range of tones within a single color. Some vertical strips are made up of repetitions of spectrum bands. This series carries complexity to a high point, with a multiplicity

of themes, textures and color interaction. A fugue-like interplay of polyphonic color and form is hinted at by a number of titles—*Praise God: For J. S. Bach*, and *For Nina Simone*. As in the new developments within the Apollo series, the artist exploits textural devices from confetti-sized dots of pure color, through cross-hatchings, spectrum bands, graduated tones of color in harmony and contrast. Some of the ideas of Klee's checker boards and other patternings are utilized. Many of the horizontally-placed design elements have been drawn from the artist's study of Amerindian and Peruvian textiles, and from design elements extrapolated from Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple designs. He continues to deal with closely related hues placed side by side for their subtle interactions. Natkin believes that his work is growing ever closer to the decorative tradition of world art, to be seen in textiles, mosaic, architectural embellishment in every culture. Again he recognizes that many of the proportions that he finds himself utilizing are drawn from the modules of Chicago architectural monuments. These paintings may be thought of as reflecting the modern city and its transparent-walled skyscrapers. Buildings, repeated cantilevered floors, bared elevator cores, colors and reflections of the structure and its opposites are jumbled in a metaphor that is both contemporary and rooted in the two-dimensional design tradition. There is a distance and an objectivity about the design of the Architectural Series that is less emotional and lyrical than either the Apollo or the informal styles.

The second direction that has assumed growing importance in Natkin's work since the maturity of the Apollo series is extremely open and improvisational. It is an all-over painting that draws upon the artist's earliest free abstract expressionist painting, but owes much to the artist's watercolor experiments, his wife's example, and to Paul Klee's *Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber*, 1922, in the Museum of Modern Art Collection. That work, rubbed and brushed into a scrap of gessoed burlap, has a subtle and informal composition that is wonderfully lyrical and fragile. The new series, begun in 1966, utilizes an over-all structure or "scatter balance" as the artist puts it. The vertical structuring is gone, and in its place is a melted, continuously changing non-referential set of interacting patterns, textures and spotty pointillisms. Many are high in key, but some new works are dark, as is *Faust Laughter*, 1969.

The new series has a warmth and intimacy that is seldom achieved in equal measure in the architectural works. The painter has been reassured by the development of the informal paintings that he has a way out of the increasingly demanding





23 *Field Mouse #1, 1967.*

pressure of his architectonic works. The informal works renew him for his return to either the Apollo paintings or the more decorative and structured works. He recalls that he wished for an increased variety in his work some years back. He longed for a broader range—more Bach-like or Shakespearian than he had thus far been able to develop. The new paintings have concentrated on the lyrical side of his nature, balanced by the order and fugue-like organization of the architectural mode. Speaking of the new lyrical paintings, Ivan Chermayeff, a lender to the exhibition, inquired of Natkin what he called the series. At a loss for a name, Natkin quoted a few lines from the Chinese, translated by Ezra Pound, as his closest sense of what the series should be titled:

“And the days are not long enough  
And the nights are not long enough,  
And life goes by  
Like a field mouse,  
Running through the grass, not touching.”

Chermayeff responded, “That’s too long a title; we’ll call them Field Mouse.”

As in the development of any creative work, the path is rarely straight from conception to delivery. After the Apollo series was well begun, Natkin retreated to *They Are Singing In Olive Land*, 1963. He had to consolidate his feelings about his earlier work before he could give total confidence to the new works. This forward and backward movement has occurred before in his work but today he moves rather easily between his three motives. He finds new possibilities in each of the three directions and he gains energy from each for the others. His work is an expression of joy and sensual satisfaction in the materials of art and the traditions of lyrical color and western abstraction that have come to him through the

impressionists and the pioneers of 20th century art. There is a sense of wonder in his art at the daring of life. He recognizes life’s scattering of forces, the separateness of families and individuals, the diversity of life, and yet he strives to celebrate the co-existence of all through his own heightened awareness. His great grid paintings are a thousand times more complex than the “boogie woogie” paintings of Mondrian and yet he is symbolizing the same urban state—now geometrically multiplied from those simple days of 1942-5. Perhaps most clearly of all, Natkin moves from imposed order to freedom, from light to dark, endeavoring to touch the extremes of feeling, but always within his hedonistic view which leans upon and depends upon the creative ideas of the western painting tradition. He grasps at the formal order that all seek in art, with his own interior forces seeming to work against that order. He senses the health as well as the weakness of our society and tries to express the spiritual chaos within the order of modern life. All of the forces of contemporary history are neutralized and dissolved in the verities of color and light, Matisse’s easy-chair, Bonnard’s checkered table cloth. Natkin is aware of the condition of modern life but he seeks to reveal the unseen warmth and beauty in it, also. He reminds us of our collective visual knowledge; he makes it new for us.

In the end, originality is not being surprising or even distinctive. Originality has to do with saying something real about life and art that stands the test of years. Most importantly, it is not whether the work is like or unlike that of others, but whether it is wholly true to itself. That is the essence of Natkin’s art. Essentially romantic, expressive of his inner self, the iridescent shimmer of his colors speaks to our feelings as truly and inexplicably as music.

Gerald Nordland

#### FOOTNOTES

1. In the brochure announcing “An exhibition of oils and watercolors by Natkin,” Oct. 4 through Nov. 1, 1964. Art Center, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, 314 South Park Street, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

2. *Op. cit.*

3. Ashton, Dore. “Robert Natkin.” *The Studio*, London. November 1962, pp. 190-2.





31 *Field Mouse: Saville's World, 1968.*







37 *The Beloved*, 1969.



# Chronology

- 1930 Born Chicago, Illinois. Museum of Fine Arts. "Lyricism in Abstract Art" at Washington Gallery of Modern Art and ICA, Boston.
- 1948-52 Study, Art School of The Art Institute of Chicago.
- 1957 Exhibits in "Momentum" Exhibition, Chicago. Award in non-juried "Navy Pier" Exhibition. Marries Judith Dolnick. Wells Street Gallery opens.
- 1958 Invited to show with fifty-three artists of Chicago and vicinity in Nancy and Arras, France. One-man show at Wells Street. One of ten one-man shows at the North Shore Art League's "Annual Chicago Area" exhibition, Winnetka.
- 1959 Group show, Alan Gallery, New York (June). Wells Street Gallery closes. One-man exhibition, Poindexter Gallery, New York City. Moves to New York City.
- 1960 "Young American" Exhibition, Whitney Museum, New York City.
- 1961 One-man show, Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles. Carnegie Biennial, Pittsburgh. One-man show, Poindexter Gallery, New York City. "New Talent" Exhibition, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.
- 1962 Pennsylvania Academy "Annual of American Art" Philadelphia. "Ways and Means", Houston Museum of Fine Arts.
- 1963 International Art Exhibition, Mitsubishi, Tokyo. One-man show, Poindexter Gallery, New York City. One-man show, Fairweather-Hardin Gallery, Chicago.
- 1964 Artist-in-Residence, Ford Foundation Grant, through The American Federation of Arts, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. One-man show, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Michigan. "Dealer's Choice", Contemporary Arts Association, Houston.
- 1965 One-man show, Poindexter Gallery, New York City. One-man show, Fairweather-Hardin Gallery, Chicago. Three-man show, Gertrude Kasle Gallery, Detroit.
- 1966 Two-man show, Gertrude Kasle Gallery, Detroit.
- 1967 One-man show, Poindexter Gallery, New York City.
- 1968 Two-man show (with Judith Dolnick), Poindexter Gallery, New York City. Five-man show, "Timeless Paintings from the USA", Galerie Paul Facchetti, Paris. Travel in Europe.

# Catalog to the Exhibition

## Paintings

*A star preceding the title indicates that the work is illustrated. Unless otherwise indicated the medium is oil on canvas; height precedes width. Unattributed loans are from the Poindexter Gallery, N.Y.C.*

- \* 1. *The Polish Rider: For Ronald Slowinski*, 1957. 80 x 63. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Charles C. Gelman, Chicago.
2. *The Red One*, 1957. Collage and oil on canvas. 80 x 60. Lent by Mr. Paul Campagna, Chicago.
3. *Summer*, 1959. 88½ x 69¾. Lent by Mrs. Elinor Poindexter, N.Y.
- \* 4. *The Heart*, 1959. 72 x 60. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. David Dolnick, Glencoe, Illinois.
5. *January*, 1960. 77¼ x 65¾. Lent by Mrs. Elinor Poindexter, N.Y.
6. *Pharaoh*, 1960. 78 x 65¾. Lent by Dr. Paul Ekman, San Francisco.
- \* 7. *Faust*, 1961. 78 x 74. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Owen Fairweather, Chicago.
- \* 8. *Venus*, 1962. 89¼ x 80½. Lent by Mrs. Elinor Poindexter, N.Y.
9. *Egypt Smile*, 1962. 82 x 93.
10. *They are Singing in Olive Land*, 1963. x . Lent by The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, N.Y.C.
11. *Othello*, 1963. 84 x 84. Lent by New York University Art Collection, N.Y.C.
- \* 12. *Green Ladder*, 1964. 79 x 65½. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. A. Hunter Land, San Francisco.
13. *Beatrice* undated. 79 x 66. Private Collection, N.Y.
14. *Spanish*, 1964. 84 x 72. Lent by the Riverside Museum, N.Y.C.
15. *Step Painting*, 1965. 87¾ x 48. Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Joshua A. Hoffs, Los Angeles.
16. *Climb in August*, acrylic on canvas, 1966. 83¾ x 72. Lent by Mrs. Vicci Sperry, Los Angeles.
17. *Puerto Rican*, 1966. 82 x 82. Lent by the Allan Stone Gallery, N.Y.C.
18. *Apollo*, acrylic on canvas, 1966. 76 x 86. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Katz, N.Y.C.
19. *Kabuki*, 1966. 79 x 89.
20. *Joshua*, 1966. 66 x 66. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Creighton Peet, San Francisco.
- \* 21. *For Nina Simone*, 1966. 84 x 72. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Allan Kovar, Barbados, W.I.
22. *Lover's Tryst*, acrylic on canvas, 1967. 70 x 70. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. William Johnstone Dearborn.
- \* 23. *Field Mouse #1*, acrylic on canvas, 1967. 89 x 79. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Ivan Chermaveff, N.Y.C.
24. *Amerindian*, acrylic on canvas, 1967. 68 x 46.
- \* 25. *Field Mouse #2*, acrylic on canvas, 1967. 78 x 88¼. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Meredith Long, Houston, Texas.
26. *Praise God: For J. S. Bach*, acrylic on canvas, 1967. 88¼ x 78¾.
27. *For Serge Gavronsky*, 1967. 84 x 72. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Frederick C. Schang, III, N.Y.C.
28. *Apollo*, 1968. 89 x 79. Lent by the Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y.C. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Meredith Long.
29. *Apollo*, acrylic on canvas, 1968. 72 x 80. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. George Robinson, N.Y.C.
30. *Apollo*, acrylic on canvas, 1968. 71 x 79. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Ben Gazzara, N.Y.C.
- \* 31. *Field Mouse: Saville's World*, acrylic on canvas, 1968. 67½ x 46. Lent by Miss Saville Ryan, N.Y.C.
32. *Faust Laughter*, acrylic on canvas, 1968. 81 x 65¼. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Allan Kovar, Barbados, W.I.
- \* 33. *Step Painting*, 1968. 90 x 48. Lent by Gertrude Kasle Gallery, Detroit.
- \* 34. *For Frank Lloyd Wright*, acrylic on canvas, undated. 80 x 66.
- \* 35. *Apollo with Blue Center*, acrylic on canvas, 1969. 88 x 78¼. San Francisco Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. George Poindexter, N.Y.C.
36. *Leda*, acrylic on canvas, 1969. 80 x 72.
- \* 37. *The Beloved*, acrylic on canvas, 1969. 87½ x 77½. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Nissenson, N.Y.C.
38. *Field Mouse #4*, acrylic on canvas, 1969. 76 x 86.
39. *I Remember Louis Sullivan*, 1969. 86 x 76. Lent by Judith Natkin, N.Y.C.
- \* 40. *The Prince: (For R. Brickner)*, acrylic on canvas, 1969. 88 x 78.

## Watercolors and Drawings

The medium is watercolor and pencil for the twelve works included in the exhibition. All works are undated and loaned by the Poindexter Gallery, N.Y.C.

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