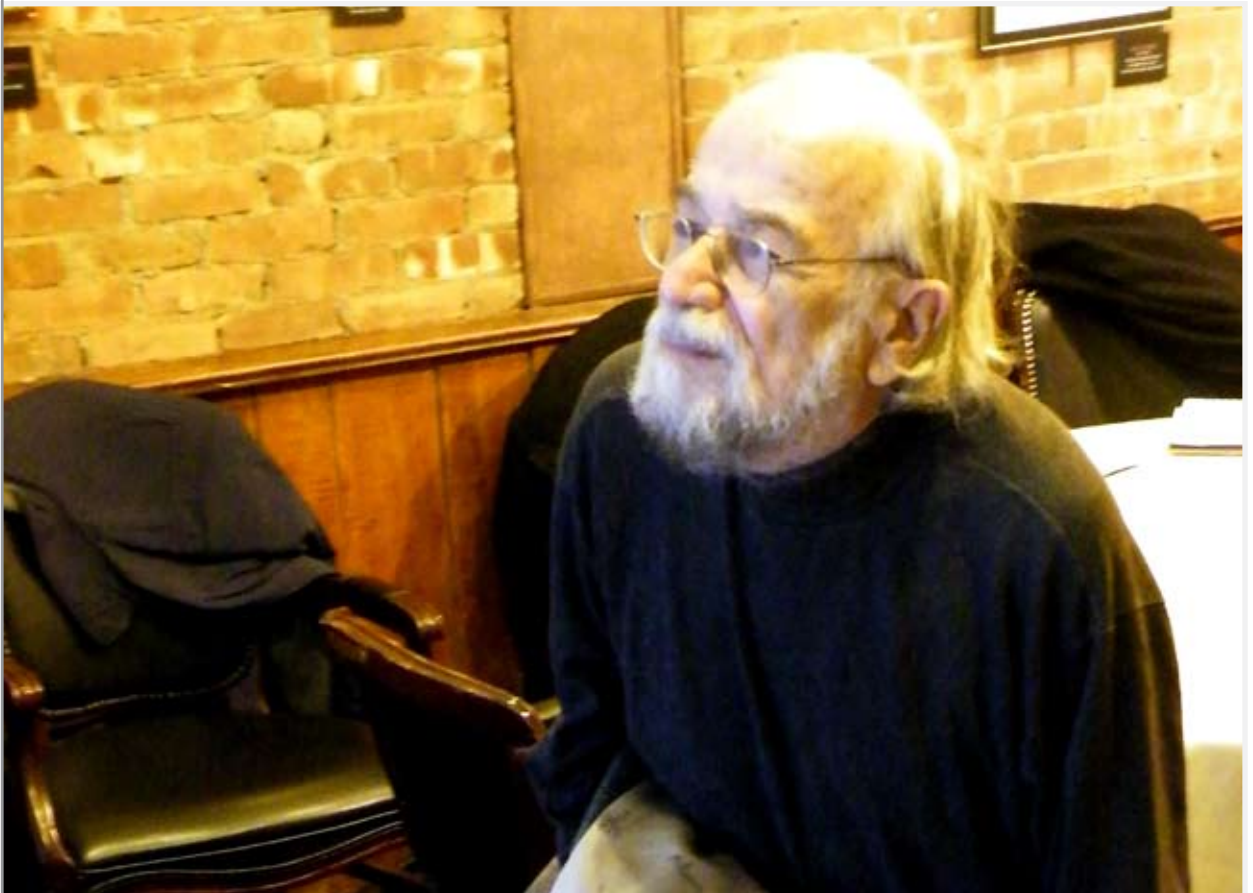


**Reaction to the Burton Silverman Lecture
November 14, 2008**

Society of Illustrators, New York, NY
UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD
Limited Residency MFA in Illustration



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“Everyday, I wake up and feel I’m just beginning.”

–Burt Silverman,

Lecture Nov 14, 2008

Burton “Burt” Silverman (b. 1928) epitomizes the artist-philosopher in society in the classic sense. His understanding of his place within the culture, and the commentary of the artist as a recorder of the human condition is a positive and uplifting life’s effort.

“Very early on in my life, I fell in love with the landscape of the human face, where all the emotional states of life are to be found, and the love affair has not faltered.”

–Burton Silverman (from his website: <http://www.burtensilverman.com/>) Retrieved, 12-12-2008

Burt’s masterful execution of the portrait often is the paramount focus of his work, leaving much of the sitters appendages and surroundings as simple gestural expressions. He deftly searches for shorthand strokes that say enough for the viewer to know exactly what the broader environment is while making a focused effort to expend the majority of the session upon his sitter’s face. With the physical gesture conveying the sitter’s mood, Burt breathes life into the person by latching onto their gaze, their mouth and their subtle neck posture. Each item brings a piece of the puzzle into the final construction of an intimate portrait.



Top: Burt Silverman **Window Seat** (Carolina backlit), 2003, Oil on Canvas, h:39 w:30 in

Middle: George Luks, **The Guitar** (a portrait of the artist’s brother with his son), 1908, Oil on Canvas, h:22 w:18 in

Lower: George Luks **The Hansom Cabby**, Early 20C Oil on Canvas, h:22 w:18 in

“Furthermore, the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man’s proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit - for gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion and love.”

-John Steinbeck’s Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, 1962



William Glackens from “The Old Lamp,” by Catalina Paez, Scribners Monthly, May 1909 , Charcoal and Watercolor wash



William Glackens “Why should you be afraid to tell us how much?” for the story “Rabbi Eliezers Christmas,” by Abraham Cahan, Schribners Monthly Dec, 1899., Charcoal and Watercolor wash

Burt is able to convey a sense of sympathy, if not love of his subjects. Burt has the ability to allow his subjects to speak through their gesture. This ability was first recognized by a broader audience in the late summer of 1956.

Burt’s initial journalistic foray to Montgomery Alabama during the Bus Boycott and into the turmoil of the Jim Crow South seems to set the tone for his willingness to voice the plight of the downtrodden and powerless as that of George Luks (1867-1933) , William Glackens (1870-1938), or even William Adolphe Bouguereau (Fr, 1825-1905) without the academic rigidity.

“I am particularly affected by images – of the unspectacular and the unheralded – of people who have, for many years now, been left out of the loop. In a world adumbrated by the sensational – shock and celebrity – the immediate texture of our lives needs to be seen again for the beauty it can provide.”

-Burt Silverman, “The Intimate Eye: Drawings by Burton Silverman” 2006 BYU Museum of Art Provo, UT, USA

Silverman found an ability to absorb the human spirit within the paper and their particular instance, creating a timeless record of a person, a soul outside the moment. Burt's sensitive line and touch certainly captures a likeness, but not a caricature. He is able to pull the personality and essence of the sitter's being out of the air, and place it on paper.

Silverman's desire to be part of something as powerful as equal rights was part of his core person, taught from his religious upbringing. Burt mentioned being in the crowd of protesters at the last rally to save Julius Rosenberg (1918–1953) and Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg (1915–1953) from what was thought to be a “Red Scare” espionage charge, in the summer of 1953.

*“ While reliable independent corroboration has been revealed that Julius Rosenberg did pass information to the Soviets, there is little evidence that his wife Ethel, executed with him, participated in espionage.”*⁵

⁵“Rosenberg sons acknowledge dad was spy.” MSNBC. Sept 17, 2008.

The outrage felt by a sham trial and verdict,



Adolphe-William Bouguereau, **Evening Mood**
1882, oil on canvas, h:81 w:42 in.
National Museum of Art, Havana



Profile and Front mug shots of Ethel Rosenberg, 1953, after her conviction.
U.S. Justice Department Photo

implicating Ethel Rosenberg didn't sit well with people with socialist sympathies, recoiling from the atrocities of the Nazis, witnessing the casualties of the Cold War mentality, Black Listing, the power of the state wielded upon those with counter ideals. The 25 year-old Silverman would seek to uphold the social struggle of the average man, and that meant using his skills as an artist. His rash and vigorous decision to go and witness the struggles of the Southern Blacks first-hand with close friend and social realist painter, Harvey Dinnerstein (b. 1928) would be a touchstone in his career, but very much in line with his moral standing.

LIFE Magazine ran photos of the boycott in March of 1956, but in that same issue ran an open letter from William Faulkner, beseeching the Northerners to stay home and let the Southerners work it out. This, his back-peddling attempt to counter the London Sunday Times quoting him as saying that he would "fight for Mississippi against the United States, even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes." Faulkner tried to correct the absurd statement in letters to



Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. having his Mug Shot taken, 1956, Montgomery AL , LIFE Magazine, March 5, 1956, p 41



Above: Burton Silverman, **Woman With Folded Arms**, 1956, Charcoal



Norman Rockwell, **Pan American Airlines Advertising Spread**, *LIFE Magazine*, March 5, 1956

three national magazines that had reported is outrageous claim.**

LIFE Magazine chose to run the article by Faulkner, the definitive writer of the American-Southern experience entitled, "A Letter to the North" requesting that America and it's Yankee outsiders leave the Southern folk to go at their own pace. Faulkner's hope was for white folk to be able to ponder this "Segregation" thing with lines like: "So I would say to all the organizations and groups which would force Integration on the South by legal process: 'Stop now for a moment...'"***

The Northern youth, including young Silverman and Dinnerstein ignored



Harvey Dinnerstein, **Brownstone** 1958-60 oil on canvas h:85 w:60 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum

**Faulkner citing from http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/faulkner_william/
—John B. Padgett, Phd., Professor at Brevard College in Brevard, N.C.
***William Faulkner, "A Letter to the North" *LIFE Magazine*, March 5, 1956 p 51 & 52

Vignettes and spot illustrations activated the page's type and content were very much the norm in the 1950s.

I came across a double spread of Norman Rockwell vignettes for Pan American Airlines, inviting "Willi Gillis" and his young War-Bride to tour the world with their post-war prosperity... A stark contrast to what was going on in the American South.

such calls, and more overt rebuffs from Southerners, and rode south. Burt's fledgling trip to Montgomery in 1956 with Dinnerstein awakened the idea of "artist as journalist", Burt's intimate desire to document each person as a unique individual with life and value speaks to his own personality and place on this plane - as an artist. This very personal approach seems counter to the world of commerce and publishing, but Burt had found that his method of documentation had/has a place within the marketplace, as well as on museum walls... Burt's take, being as valid as any commentator on radio or newsprint.

His sketches of Dr. Martin Luther King, bus drivers, average citizens in intimate church rallies gave the public a feeling of "being there" more than a stark photograph. Burt had pre-filtered the extraneous visual clutter from the picture plane, and focused only upon the humanity within the unique moment. He was able to turn "news" into a "documentary". The artist's eye-hand working together in a reactive manner had merged with Burt's social voice. Speed and focus merged. The



Above: *Burton Silverman, Rev. Martin Luther King Speaking, 1956, Charcoal*

Below: *Walter Richards, Drawings from A Divided South Searches Its Soul. LIFE Magazine, July 9, 1956, pp 98-144*



Silverman series was being executed during the same time-frame artists like Walter Richards had illustrations supporting articles about the Integration struggle, but look detached, if not cartoonish in comparison to the intimate scenes portrayed by Burt.

"...circumstances dictated the method of line and touch."

–Burt Silverman Lecture, Nov. 14, 2009

His work was picked up by the *New York Post* in September of 1956, publishing his spontaneous and fresh drawings as a documentary series on the bus boycott. Burt mentions this as a pivotal break. His desire to document something bigger than himself, something bigger than all of it's players, affirmed that an artist's journal can also become something bigger–
– a documentary illustration.

Self assigning his first job led to highly visible assignments with clients like the "Profiles" segment of *The New Yorker*, *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Esquire* and *Sports Illustrated*. Each new assignment seemed to still allow the artist's focus, the individuals portrait, to be in the forefront.



Above: Burton Silverman, Church Gathering, 1956, Charcoal

Below: Motorcycle Cops and Boycotters LIFE Magazine, Feb 2,1956, p 27



"Most painters can't experience this connection that illustration has with society"

-Burt Silverman Lecture, Nov. 14, 2009

Burt continued to document moments of social significance throughout his career equally as the intimate moments of the average individual resting from their labors. He has documented student protesters during the Viet Nam war and the drudgery that can be the life of a New York City stripper. His projects are either assigned or self initiated, but the mastery of line continues to pull the casual reader in – focus shifting the pace to a meditation. He found satisfaction depicting people outside the limelight, outside the norm; the neglected.

Burt's career followed the core of his personal interests, initially forged by his self-assigned project to document a movement close to his own ideals. The entire trip was foolhardy, if not dangerous for a Jewish kid with a slight build to show up in a backwater town with a high emotional key. But, he did. He followed his gut, or perhaps his heart. This, beyond the mastery of the medium, is what I have taken from Burt's lecture;

- **Stick to Your Core Beliefs**
- **Follow Your Instincts**
- **Art First - Commerce Later.**