



Ivan Albright, *Self Portrait*

## THE FINE ARTS

# "NO SINGLE FACT IS AS IT SEEMS"

*Ivan Albright,  
Veteran Maverick,  
Makes His Own World*

By KATHARINE KUH

**N**ODDING, joking, rushing, jerking, Ivan Albright piloted me through his new house in Woodstock, Vermont, or more correctly his two houses—one for children, grandchildren, and guests, the other chiefly for his wife and himself. In contrast to Chicago's Near North Side, where until recently the Albrights lived, this romantic and, let me add, elegant colonial setting gives the lie to any further theory that the painter is a Midwestern-oriented artist. For years I thought so, but I was wrong. Nothing in his work has changed. The same pulverized, uncompromising images emerge from Vermont as came out of Chicago. A serene New England landscape threaded by the lovely Ot-

tauquechee River affects him no more than did the bleak sprawl of an industrialized city.

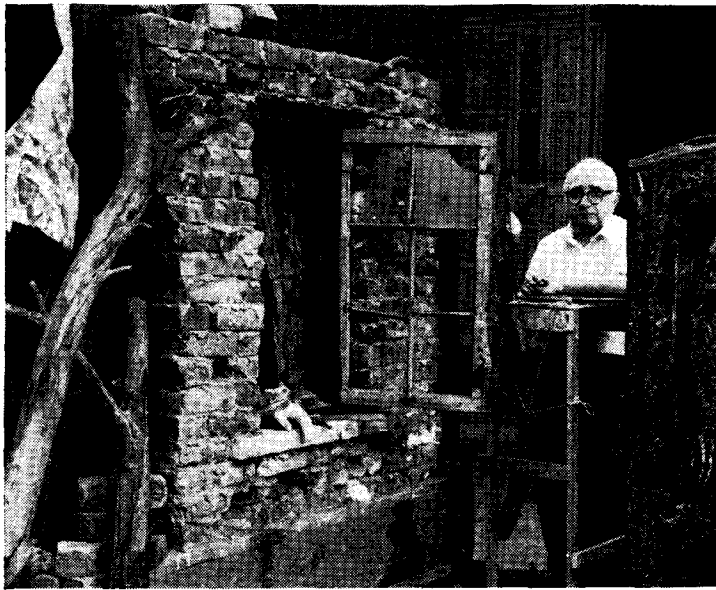
Curiously, this man, who is obsessively immersed in his own painting and who apparently is uninfluenced by any contemporary movements, does not include even one of his works in either house, though both are filled with art from all periods. To see what he is doing, one must go to the studio, an authentic Albright landmark meticulously tailored to his specific needs. And his needs are not simple. For this painter who appears the very incarnation of nervous tension is perhaps the most patient, painstaking artist alive today. In his work nothing happens by chance.

Each detail is planned, studied, and researched in depth. Even that tireless prober, Edwin Dickinson, has never devoted twenty-four years to one composition, as Albright did with *The Window*.

And speaking of windows, in the new studio there are several which were specially designed so that, inch by inch, separate glass sections can be regulated to control the light. Albright dislikes bright light or, for that matter, any kind of cheerful, flat sunlight. He prefers cloudy, gray skies which allow brooding shadows at once to define form and yet suggest the unknown.

Despite his mercilessly detailed technique, one must not suppose that Albright is interested in the object per se.

The artist in his studio with set-up for the painting, at right, *The Window*



True, he stages elaborate set-ups for his compositions, going so far as to reproduce a drab wall, brick by brick, or tear and resew a worn velveteen sleeve until each wrinkle has the desired consistency. But these visual facts are merely the raw material he manipulates and totally transforms. He is, paradoxically, an abstract artist who deals with reality only to destroy it by bending all images to his unique metaphysical bias. Projecting his own kind of ambiguous space, his own labyrinthian perspective, his own irrational light, he creates a jungle of insecurity.

Albright's methods, which at first glance appear literal, are in fact the reverse. He paints solely what he thinks, sometimes what he wants, but never what he sees. What he sees acts only as his point of departure. Attracted by the perversities of life, he infuses the commonplace with deceptive allusions. He once observed, "I like to see dust move and crawl over an object like a film." And, to be sure, his paintings have the touch of dusty death. But he is not concerned alone with dissolution. "Let's say I'm equally interested in growth and death. How can you divide them?"

Albright looks on the human body as man's tomb. "Without eyes the light would not hurt; without flesh the pain would not hurt; without legs our motion might accelerate. Without a body we might be men," he says. At best, he transcends human limitations by imperiously disregarding the laws of nature. He shows us human flesh, no matter how young, and inanimate objects, no matter how new, in a relentless journey toward

extinction. He claims that when the artist moves, all things move with him. "If I stir, they stir. If I stand arrested, they become motionless." In short, he is the total impresario—to such an extreme that he prefers smooth board to canvas. Not wishing to fight the texture of woven cloth, he wants to weave his own painting. In an interview several years ago, Albright confessed, "I hope to control the observer, to make him move and think the way I want him to. . . I want to jar the observer into thinking—I want to make him uncomfortable."

**WORKING** intensively for some three hours each day, he stops as soon as the painting "begins to look good." At that point he finds his critical faculties becoming blunted. More than any other artist I recall, he can appraise his own work with unflinching objectivity. He knows his strengths; he knows his weaknesses. For him, his two top paintings are *The Door* and *The Window*. He spent long years on both, planning them in excruciating detail with endless preliminary drawings, notes, written directions, and three-dimensional set-ups. Conflict and turmoil distinguish every inch of the two compositions. Warring forces tip, tilt, slant, invert, twist, and foreshorten each object until the eye reels and the object, ceasing to be itself, takes on hallucinatory overtones. At the same time, the compositions, like tangled quagmires, dispense with ordinary boundaries. Sometimes it is virtually impossible to separate top from bottom or inside from outside in an Albright painting.

And that is precisely what he wants—to confuse and shock, to force re-evaluations. In a notebook of working directions for *The Window* he wrote, "Make the painting more accurate and more accurate and more accurate." But his idea of accuracy was less a realistic than a compulsive one. *The Window* for him was an experience to be seen simultaneously from outside and inside. He tells himself to "make a view of the window as if a man is walking by it." Then, in the next sentence, he demands that each object be seen from the inside in multiple combined positions. For only thus does Albright believe that simulated motion can be achieved—not as a finite action, but as a creative transmutation. With unorthodox freedom, he defines motion as the third dimension. Relying on physical findings for purely psychic effects, he has developed a kind of simultaneous vision that is a far remove from the structural emphasis of cubism.

**ALBRIGHT** claims that art concepts like motion, space, color, and form are all invented by man, and that without man they cease to exist. Though a door is not curved, if the mind envisions it that way, it is curved. Hence, he painted his famous *Door* as a slightly convex door-coffin combination. With the same speculative drive he questions the role of color, asking himself, "What is the nature of color anyway? Does it build up—does it add strength—does it add softness—what does it do? Why does a certain object have a definite color? Take all the color away from it—then put it back. What is the significance of its

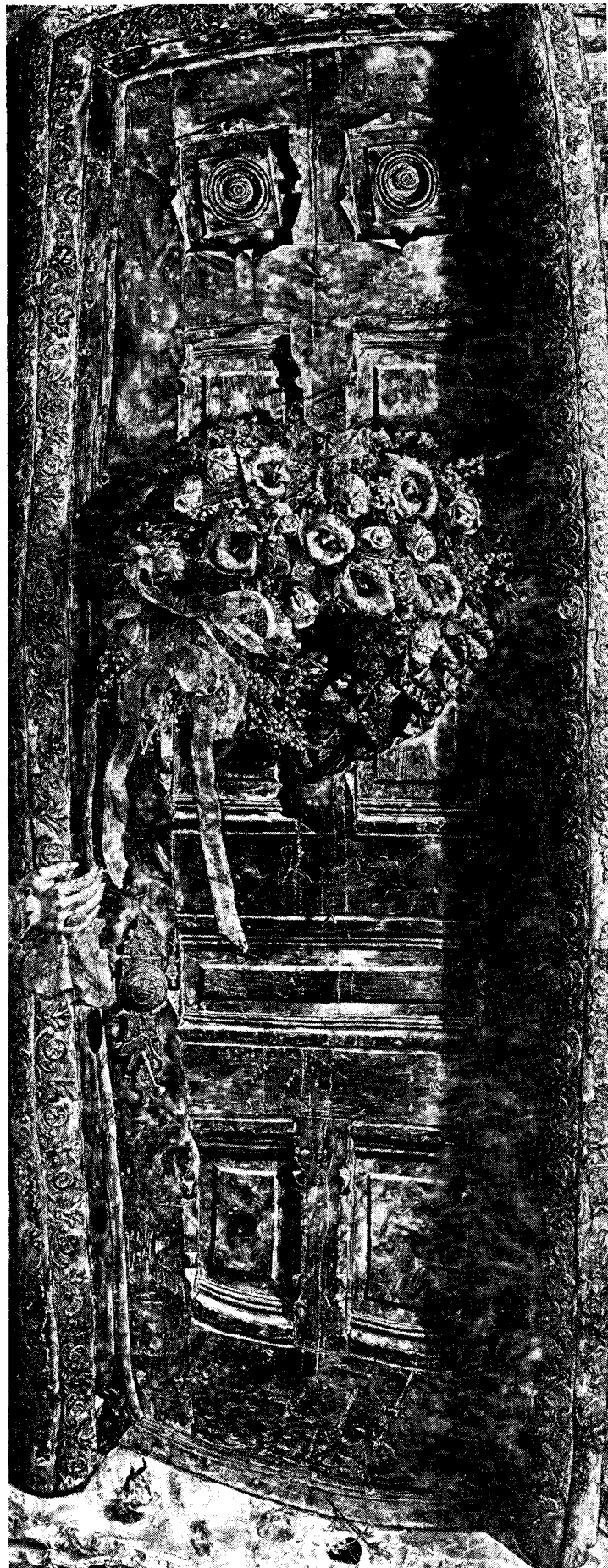


color?" The answer "is not in the eye, nor in reason." He implies that it comes only from one's own sensibility, one's cumulative experience. Just as the real transforms itself into the abstract for him, so dark and light merge. "Put everything in total darkness and you see nothing. Put everything in brilliant light and you see nothing." If Albright has a leitmotif it stems from his conviction that no single fact is as it seems.

In his youth, this artist, who is now approaching seventy, headed toward architecture but shifted to art after two years as a medical draftsman in World War I. The early surgical watercolors and drawings done rapidly on the spot in French base hospitals may seem antipathetic to Albright's subsequent mature style, partly because of the spontaneity with which they were executed, partly because they turned brutal wounds into the equivalents of growing plants. Instead of the dusty, almost dead plum color that characterizes so much of the later work ("maybe because I'm gloomy") we find here a veritable rainbow of iridescent hues. And yet there is continuity, for already the artist was rearranging nature to fit his needs. As later he was to invest the healthy with encroaching decay, so now in a world of death he made death live. These sketches remain an unforgettable indictment of war, both as documents and as exotic comments on the profligate destruction of the young.

ONE of my reasons for going to Vermont was to see a new painting Albright had started the previous fall. Already a year old, it would, he felt, require at least another five or six years to complete. Realizing that time can subvert the best laid plans, he never names a work until it is finished. The new one is temporarily called *The Vermonter*. Except for two portraits (of his late father-in-law, Captain Joseph Medill Patterson, and of Mary Block) this is the artist's first figure painting in thirty-five years. The subject is a man in his middle seventies who comes regularly to the studio for long hours each week. Between visits, a dummy carefully constructed by Albright suffices, but for head, hands, and body articulation the sitter is indispensable. According to Albright he chose a model "who has lived and who feels as tired as I do." Could it be that the artist paints himself as well as his sitter?

Tacked up on the studio wall is a crude chart with meaning for no one but the painter. Words and brief lines, both frequently crossed out or altered, act as directives. By the time the painting is finished, it is unlikely that any of the guideposts will remain as originally conceived. Nearby on an easel stands a "static drawing"—at least so Albright



—The Art Institute of Chicago.

*The Door*





Preliminary charcoal drawing for unfinished painting, at right, *The Vermonter*

describes it. For me, it was neither a drawing nor static, but a superb charcoal, white chalk, and black pastel portrait on canvas. Albright considers it static only because it is closer to nature, to what one sees, than to the secret turbulence he feels invests all life. The background is naturalistic, the figure direct, three-dimensional, and harmonious.

And this is exactly what Albright does not want in the final composition. Relentlessly priming and questioning himself in his notebook, he suggests "moving model so light falls strongest on shoulder—then moving it back so light is stronger on face." Thus he makes his own arbitrary light. Next he directs himself to "put stubble of beard on pulsating flesh" and "have end of nose literally wriggle." Now he wants the cap to turn sharply in one direction, the head to turn in the opposite direction, as if the figure were caught in conflicting forces.

Even a modest silverpoint drawing of

a bridge becomes the occasion for an entire book of sketches and notes. "Have bridge angle more than it does. Force more interesting rocks into view. Change their position and arrange them in stream so they make flow of water more rapid." The word is always "more," for Albright does not hold with the modern philosophy that less makes more. He deliberately exaggerates the multiplicity of life. Turner, it is said, was less interested in imitating nature than improving on it. Albright, I would guess, feels otherwise. He, too, changes nature, not to improve it, but to energize it with new meaning.

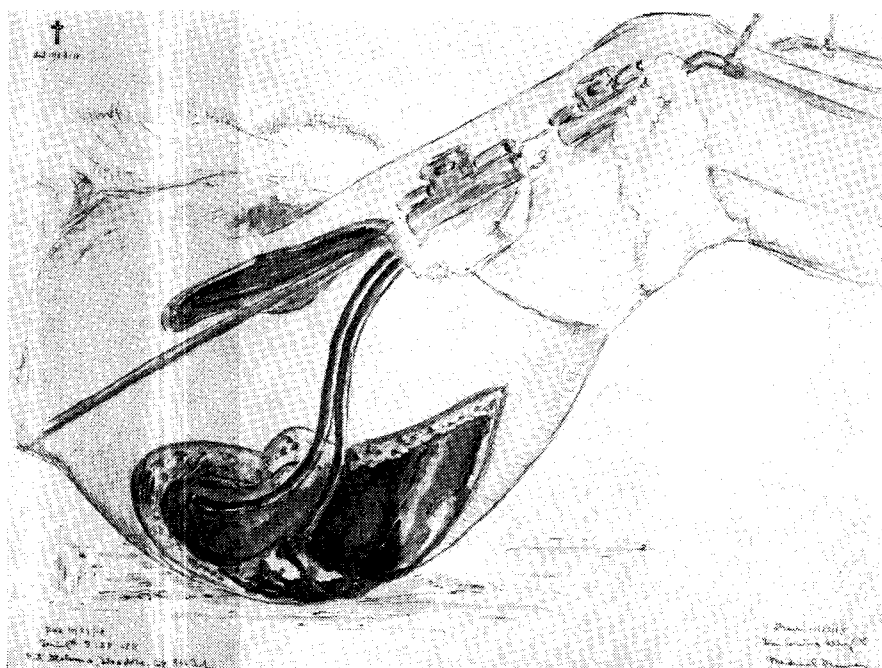
Except for Paul Klee, no modern artist has so frankly employed titles to underline the meaning of his work. What could be more evocative of guilt than the real name of *The Door: That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do*? Whether we see here a closed coffin lid, a closed door, or both, the same finality is implied. And, of course, *The Window* eventually became *Poor Room—There is*

*no Time, no End, no Today, no Yesterday, no Tomorrow, only the Forever, and Forever and Forever without End*, a title that might seem corny if it accompanied any other painting. A half-nude man in a bowlser seen against shabby furniture under a naked light bulb is called *And God Created Man in His Own Image (Room 203)*. The title echoes the compassion implicit in the picture. In most of Albright's work, compassion plays a central role. The artist sympathizes with the human predicament he lays bare.

If the titles have poetic overtones, this is hardly surprising, for Albright has long written verse as "a rest or reaction from painting," and, also, perhaps, as a way of exploring his attitudes toward art. In a poem about a painter he observes, "And the sky is not blue to him . . . And the river is not held within its banks . . . And the tree is not a tree to him . . . And colors are not just colors to him. . . ."



*And God Created Man in  
His Own Image (Room 203).*



—Collection Mr. and Mrs. William Benton.

Leaf from notebook of medical drawings, 1918.



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## The Ordeal of the Short Distance

AN ASTRONAUT with a taste for irony can look down on the earth-ball and ponder the melancholy fact that it will take him longer to travel a few blocks in the average city than to circle the entire world. For the city has become a stage for the humiliation of modern man engaged in the act of short distance travel. Man has fixed his gaze on the distant places, but he has given absurdly little attention to his everyday need for circulating in the immediate vicinity. His genius in science and invention has gone into the large leaps; what happens on wheels and on foot is a disgrace to the race. Man's new access to the universe gives him cosmic grandeur but a trip to the other side of town gives him the willies. The symbol of the age is not the spaceship but the bottleneck.

In today's world, life in a metropolitan center is a morose demonstration of the failure of otherwise intelligent men to manage their environment. Consider, for example, just one aspect of New York City's short-distance crisis. There are three superhighways running from inside the city to the outlying main arteries. All three superhighways are relatively new but they were obsolete even before the concrete was laid. They provide for only three lanes of traffic in each direction, instead of the minimum of five or six that are clearly required. There are few turnoffs for disabled cars. These highways now have to be rebuilt at prodigious cost.

Are we to believe that the men who planned these major arteries didn't know the car population was rising? If so, they

are plainly in the wrong business and should be barred from further interference with the movement of vehicles. It is possible, of course, that the designers were chained to inadequate budgets. In that case, they should have refused out of professional pride to proceed with ventures that were patently doomed. It is quite possible that the congestion on these three "expressways" has been responsible for more cases of twitching, hypertension, adrenal exhaustion, and elevated blood pressure in New York than business and marital difficulties combined. New York City may have a surfeit of brainpower, but there is no evidence that any of it has gone into its highway planning.

The automobile, conceived as a device for swift and convenient locomotion, is rapidly becoming a thing of fits and starts, an isolation chamber for sealing people off from continuous movement. The automobile horn is now less a device for alerting people to danger than it is an outlet for the boiling desperation of traffic-snarled and snarling drivers who don't know what else to do. This, of course, creates and compounds other problems: Noise pollution and air pollution come out of the same bottleneck.

Can nothing be done about the size of automobiles? Whatever the advantages of the large car on open highways, the moment it gets onto a city street it becomes an unholy instrument of congestion and air poisoning. Space in the heart of any large city is limited and valuable. Buildings are taxed according to the amount of land they occupy. Because of

this, the emphasis is on vertical construction. An automobile, for no functional reason, is a horizontal phenomenon. It takes up space in defiance of all the logic that pertains to the operation of a large community. Moreover, the passion of designers to make cars look like Frankfurters has resulted in front seats that require an unnatural sitting position and rear seats that make human legs an encumbrance. A long protrusion jutting far out over the rear wheels represents an ultimate tribute to baggage but makes parking the exercise of the devil. The net effect of this squeezed-out design is to reduce by one-third to one-half the number of cars that can pass a heavily trafficked point within a given time.

It is too easy to blame the automobile manufacturers. Less than a decade ago, Detroit put a major thrust behind smaller and lighter cars. It soon developed that when a man went into a salesroom to buy a compact car, he wanted the biggest one he could get. Competitive escalation in the size of compacts reached the point where some automobile owners could boast that their compacts were larger than some full-size cars. An automobile, like government, tends to reflect the level of public taste.

THE penalty for oversized and overpowered cars is not confined to slow-downs in traffic. Quite literally, people have to pay through the nose for extra horsepower. The combustion engine has converted city streets into public gas chambers. The motors in automobiles, of course, are far less malevolent than diesel engines in trucks and buses, but there are more of them and they are generally in need of repair.

It is while en route to an airport that the automobile has its most poignant confrontation with the jet age. Few roads leading out of the average large city are as clogged as the approaches to the airports. No amount of detailed explanation can convince a man who has just missed his plane that there are good reasons why it should take him longer to drive six miles than to fly 600.

Airports are not built. They are rebuilt—sometimes three and four times within a decade. Again, are we to believe that the airport planners were carefully insulated from the facts showing that increasing numbers of Americans were taking to the air? Chicago's O'Hare Field was built against the background of the continual failures of nearby Midway, where three successive reconstructions were outmoded before they were completed. Yet O'Hare, despite the hundreds of millions spent in the original construction and in various enlargements, is still ten years behind its needs. Landing strips are inadequate. Ramps for arriving planes are insufficient. It is not at all unusual to be in-