

# Art in America

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## Jonathan Ehrenberg at Earl McGrath

Jonathan Ehrenberg's debut exhibition comprised 10 large oil paintings on canvas and eight related preparatory drawings executed with colored pencils and graphite on white paper (all 2000-2001). His work might be easy to overlook, because it is so still in a period of such strident clamor and visual congestion. Ehrenberg's subjects lie just outside his studio, which is perched at the top of a building on 68th Street and Madison Avenue: the enclosures, skylights, chimneys and air ducts that crown the roofs of New York City. Interestingly, he isolates these functional and esthetically indifferent forms from their original urban context. The huddled shapes frequently are situated near the center of a composition on an even ground that may occasionally rise steeply to meet the flat sky against which the tops of the forms are profiled. Ehrenberg handles his architectural motifs as if they were still-life elements subject to rearrangement. The stateliness of Morandi and the quirkiness of

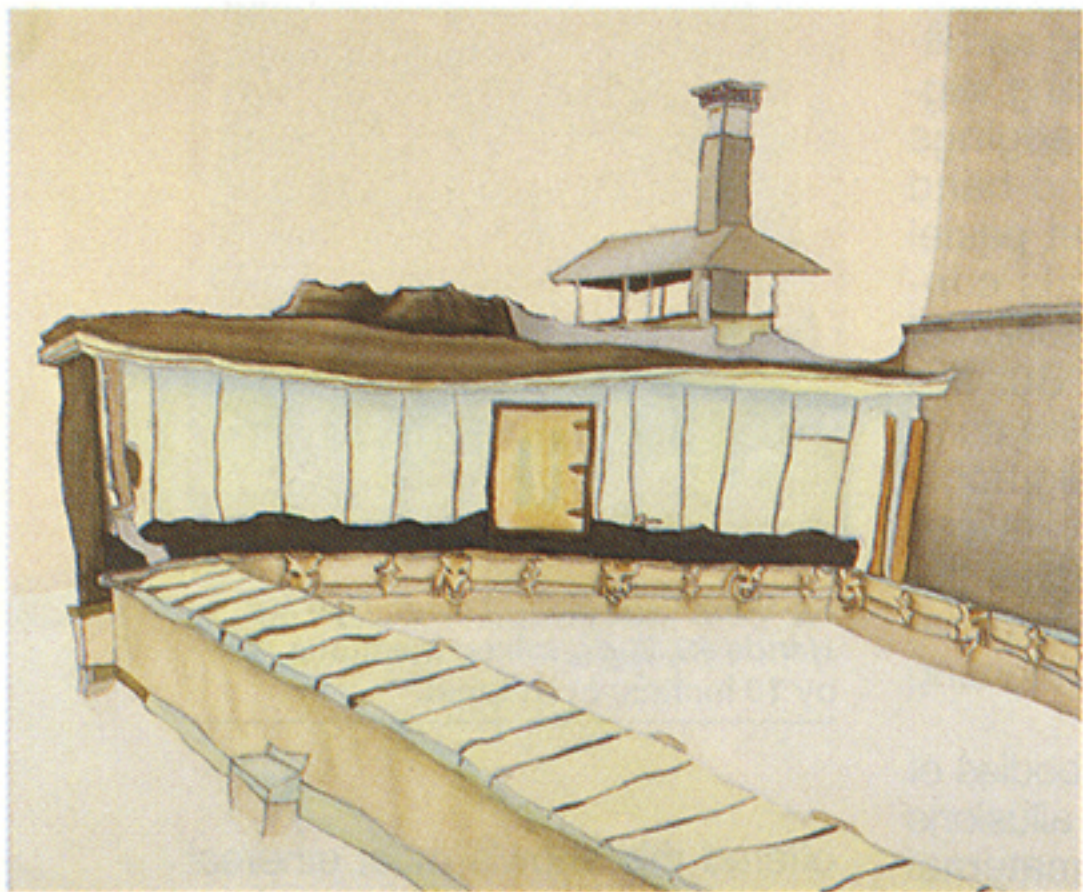
late Guston both come to mind.

Those two masters, however, were interested in dense brushwork, alternately suffocating and life-giving. Not so the younger artist. Ehrenberg primes his canvases with a paint roller in order to obtain a uniform tooth. Next, he rubs in the oil paint with cloths, filling in areas of the composition and wiping off much of the pigment to create thin surfaces that emulate the fluid effects of watercolor. The trembling lines that establish the contours of objects, on the other hand, are painted with the brush. Ehrenberg's luminous palette of beiges, peach, light browns, blues and greens approximates the hues of ice creams.

In *Untitled (Rooftop #6)*, 2001, the forms are arranged in the left half of the composition and parallel to the picture plane. The ground—unblemished by cast shadows—is blank, and the sky that occupies a little over one-third of the composition is characteristically void. All signs of life have been excised, and all formal relationships simplified. Quivering lines link the various elements, while stucco, glass, metal, cement and sky share a disquieting uniformity of texture. The singular silence that permeates the picture adds to the surreal atmosphere.

Ehrenberg achieves different orders of drama by reexamining his clustered shapes from a shifted angle or from a higher or lower vantage point. He demonstrates that a painter can still exact a peculiar poetry from a subject most of us would consider to be irredeemably mundane.

—*Michaël Amy*



Jonathan Ehrenberg: *Untitled (Rooftop #2)*, 2001, oil on canvas, 42 by 50 inches; at Earl McGrath.