Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on November 12, 2003.

Meyer Lieberman recently celebrated his 80th birthday. He was quick to point out that Picasso painted until he was 92 and Chagall was doing monumental works well into his 80s. Lieberman said that an interesting thing is happening: “When you live long enough things start to come back.”

For example, someone bought one of his paintings at an estate sale in San Diego, found the artist’s address on the back of the painting, and wrote to tell him about it. People are inheriting Lieberman’s paintings and letting him know about that, too. However, having been painting for 50 years, he’s forgotten some of his early works. So new owners of the old works have been kind enough to send photographs of the paintings they inherited or bought, and for Lieberman, it is like being reacquainted with old friends. This experience reminds him of the continuity of life.

Recognizing that he was approaching half a century of exhibiting, Lieberman wanted to mark this with something special and was delighted when an art gallery in Kingston, New York, agreed. Lieberman filled this rather large gallery with a well-received retrospective of his paintings. Another of Lieberman’s works was on the cover of the American Psychologist in January 2002, and readers can refer to that issue for additional detail about the artist’s background (see Fowler, 2002). That cover image was of concert pianist Alicia Delaroccha. Not too long ago, Lieberman and his wife Nina, a retired psychologist, saw Delaroccha perform on a television program and remarked on the vigor she still brings to her work. Lieberman’s image of the concert pianist was also included in the art exhibit at the headquarters of the American Psychological Association in Washington, DC, celebrating 10 years of art on the covers of the American Psychologist. This exhibit is organized around themes, and the January 2002 cover was included in the group focusing on the theme of “work.”

When he graduated from the Art Students’ League in 1950, Lieberman’s work focused on religious themes. Ben Shahn, a well-known artist and Lieberman’s friend, told him to do something other than just religious paintings. It was the impetus he needed to branch out, and his paintings now include, among others, jazz players, athletes, and one of his favorite subjects, children. “For Lieberman, the movement of a child alone is a work of art. You’ll find children running throughout his paintings. They run through weddings, fly kites, skate on ponds” (Cassai, 2003, p. 8).

A theme within Lieberman’s body of work is the image of people so absorbed with what they are doing that they are indifferent to their surroundings, completely immersed in their activity, and responding freely and fully to the moment. Children embody this quality at play. Children at play also exhibit another of Lieberman’s key themes: movement. Throughout all his paintings he tries to portray motion. He uses color, breaking it up and carrying it through a painting to achieve movement. In the painting of the Spanish pianist Alicia Delaroccha that appears on the January 2002 cover of the American Psychologist, the beauty and movement of her music is expressed by the exotic flowers on the grand piano, the many dots of color in her dress, and the flowers sending out feelers in the upper field: “root forms of music searching for a listening heart” (Cassai, 2003, p. 8).

Action is evident in Kite Time on the cover of this issue. Lieberman had observed children flying kites countless times in the fields near his studio, where it is quite hilly and also windy. Two of Lieberman’s Japanese-style kites resemble fish. This picture was painted when Lieberman was using a pointillist style. “I went through a series of techniques over the last 50 years. I was a realist painter in school, then when I graduated I went impressionist for a while. But then I got hooked on pointillism and stayed with it for 25 years” (Cassai, 2003, p. 8). French painter Georges Seurat, perhaps the best-known pointillist, was an important influence on Lieberman’s work. One major difference between the two is that Seurat thought figures should be formal and noble, crystallized and stiff, whereas Lieberman prefers fluidity and motion. Seurat strived for a monumental tranquility, while Lieberman captures a lively spontaneity. After a quarter century of using pointillism, Lieberman’s painting took a new direction when he turned to linear cubism. Long an admirer of Picasso and Braque, Lieberman finally became brave enough to break up his images, and at age 80, he likes the new look.

REFERENCES

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