



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

ROBERT VICKREY (1926–2011)

*Clown in Armor*

Egg tempera on gessoed panel, 33 1/2 x 23 7/8 in.

Signed (at lower right): Robert Vickrey

Painted in 1961

RECORDED: Robert Vickrey, “Giving Them the Bird,” *Time*, March 10, 1967, illus. (detail of a reversed image) // Robert Vickrey and Diane Cochrane, *New Techniques in Egg Tempera* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1973), p. 60 illus.

EXHIBITED: Midtown Galleries, New York, April 10–May 5, 1962, *Robert Vickrey*, no. 3 illus. // Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio, 1964, *Mid-Year Show* // National Academy of Design, New York, *Audubon Artists Annual* // University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, Arizona, February 17–April 1, 1973, and traveling, *Robert Vickrey: A Retrospective of Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors*, p. 59 illus. in color

EX COLL: [Midtown Galleries, New York]; Richard Shields; sale, William Doyle Galleries, New York, November 6, 1996, lot. 124; to private collection, until the present

A leading exponent of Magic Realism in America, Robert Vickrey painted what he referred to as “imaginary realities”: meticulously rendered images of figures portrayed in stark, enigmatic spaces (as quoted in Philip Eliasoph, *Robert Vickrey: The Magic of Realism* [New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2008], p. 191). His skillful manipulation of light and shadow, as well as his deft use of cinematic devices, heightened the mystery and emotional intensity of his paintings in addition to imbuing them with a near-abstract quality. In explaining his approach, Vickrey stated: “I paint all my paintings in my head. Most of them are dreamscapes... I paint pictures that look like scenes from movies ... [and] try to transcend the objects I portray, telling you more about them that you might otherwise see” (as quoted in Eliasoph, p. 11).

Born in New York City, Vickrey spent his childhood in Reno, Nevada, until 1936, when he moved to New York to live with his father. (Vickrey’s parents divorced shortly after his birth.) As well as studying art at school, he familiarized himself with the work of Titian, Rembrandt, El Greco, and other Old Master artists on excursions to The Frick Collection and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1947, after attending Wesleyan University and Yale University, Vickrey enrolled in classes at the Art Students League of New York, where he studied with the urban realists Reginald Marsh and Kenneth Hayes Miller—figurative artists who shared his love of Old Master painting and fine draftsmanship. Following this, Vickrey enrolled at the Yale School of Fine Arts, ultimately graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1950.

While most of Vickrey's fellow students at Yale succumbed to the growing taste for abstraction—especially the gestural style of the Abstract Expressionists—Vickrey, as he recalled, “went my own way” (Robert Vickrey, *Robert Vickrey: Artist at Work* [New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1979], p. 15). An expert draftsman, Vickrey developed a hyper-realist approach which he applied to provocative depictions of figures shown in strange, sometimes claustrophobic environments which, coupled with his painstaking technique, suffused his work with a disquieting, otherworldly mood. As he would later acknowledge: “I have been told that my work has strong psychological overtones, and ... it's true ... daily life has strong psychological overtones that I simply try to portray” (ibid, p. 29).

An aesthetic individualist, Vickrey also set himself apart from his milieu by choosing to work in egg tempera, an exacting technique that he mastered to perfection. Along with artists such as Andrew Wyeth and George Tooker, Vickrey subsequently played a key role in reviving this challenging and age-old medium, advancing the art of tempera painting even further through his best-selling guidebook, *New Techniques in Tempera*, published in 1973. (Vickrey was initially introduced to tempera by Lewis E. York, one of his professors at Yale.) During these formative years, Vickrey also became intrigued by avant-garde film, ranging from Italian Realism and New Wave to the movies of Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Wells. In addition to making his own short films, he would go on to incorporate cinematic devices, such as elevated perspectives, dramatic lighting, tightly cropped designs, and sloping angles, into many of his paintings.

During the early 1950s, Vickrey established his reputation as a leading New York realist on the basis of works such as *Labyrinth* (1951; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York)—one of his

earliest depictions of Catholic nuns in incongruously menacing surroundings—and *Gravel* (1952; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas), an equally unsettling picture which features a group of children playing in a barren landscape. (For color illustrations, see Eliasoph, pp. 78 and 80.) Both pieces were included in his solo exhibitions at the Creative Gallery in New York, in 1951 and 1953 respectively, where they were well-received by the art press, among them a reviewer for the *New York Times* who observed: “Robert Vickrey lets a meticulous technique and a realistic style serve a fantastic imagination. Full of obliquely expressed sympathy for the human situation in vivid and original ways, [his paintings] symbolize loneliness or hostility or simply the pains of growing up” (as quoted in Eliasoph, p. 72).

In 1954, having participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s annual exhibition of contemporary art in 1951, 1952, 1953, and 1954 (a notable coup for an up-and-coming painter working in a realist style), Vickrey joined the stable of artists associated with the Midtown Galleries, which, under the direction of Alan D. Gruskin, showcased the work of contemporary American painters such as Isabel Bishop, Betty Parsons, and Paul Cadmus. Between 1954 and 1976, Vickrey had ten solo exhibitions at Midtown, achieving critical acclaim and financial success—to the extent that his paintings often sold before the opening of his show. Debuted at Vickrey’s one-man exhibition at Midtown in the spring of 1962, *Clown in Armor* underscores exactly what Gruskin loved about Vickrey’s work, namely, his high level of craftsmanship, his skillful manipulation of space, and, most importantly, his concern for translating the human condition into paint.

*Clown in Armor* is one of a series of insightful paintings of elderly clowns, created during the 1950s and into the late 1960s, in which Vickrey explored the theme of aging and decay, depicting his

subjects dressed in what he described as a “variety of extravagant costumes” (as quoted in Eliasoph, p. 162). “Some of my older sitters show their sadness,” he said, “while others can be aggressive.” (As quoted in Eliasoph, p. 161. Vickrey’s works in this genre also include *Circus Figure* [1961; Newark Museum] and *Clown in Gold Cape* [1962; San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego, California].) In *Clown in Armor*, one of the most unusual of the group, Vickrey renders his subject close-up on the picture plane against an unadorned background, a strategy that imbues the image with a sense of monumentality that seems very much in keeping with the heavy suit of armor that shields the clown’s thick-set body and gigantic hands. The man’s pose is erect—even defiant—the artist interpreting him as a “god of war” (Robert Vickrey and Diane Cochrane, *New Techniques in Egg Tempera* [New York: Watson-Guption, 1973], p. 60.). However, the ravages of time are clearly apparent in the man’s wrinkled, fleshy face, captured so effectively with fine, granulated brushwork. The fact that his eyes are tightly shut suggests a determined state of mind that is amplified by the cold, steel armor that both traps and protects him. Vickrey later related that he refrained from using a model for this painting, making up both the face and the bizarre suit of armor that encases his subject, preventing “any movement or flexibility” (Vickrey and Cochrane, p. 60).

Philip Eliasoph posits that *Clown in Armor*, and similar paintings by Vickrey, can be viewed as an “allegorical rumination of American military follies between the Cold War and the Vietnam conflict” (Eliasoph, p. 162). Certainly, *Clown in Armor* stirred up interest beyond the art world. Indeed, the painting served as the inspiration for the cartoonish portrayal of Lyndon B. Johnson that was used as a backdrop to *MacBird!*, a satirical and highly controversial 1967 off-Broadway play by Barbara Garson, in which she interpreted the Kennedy assassination, Lyndon Johnson’s [MacBird’s] rise and fall, and her own aversion to the Vietnam War in terms of the plot of Macbeth. In a

published letter to the editor of *Time* magazine, Vickrey explained that his dealer had been approached by the director of the production about using *Clown in Armor* as a part of the stage set, but he refused permission. The production designer of the show subsequently arranged for the creation of a closely related image featuring an old man in armor, his features, like those in Vickrey's painting, not unlike those of the unpopular Johnson. See Robert Vickrey, "Giving Them the Bird," *Time*, March 10, 1967, which reproduces both the painting and the cartoon. See also "The Theater: Mangy Terrier," *Time*, March 3, 1967.)

Aside from creating thought-provoking temperas such as *Clown in Armor*, Vickrey also achieved renown as a portraitist, especially between 1957 and 1968, when he executed likenesses of prominent figures such as John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor for the covers of *Time*—an experience he chronicled in his book, *The Affable Curmudgeon* (1987). Vickrey's publications also include *Cape Cod's Cockiest Crook, or, Con Man's Carnival* (1996, with illustrations by Edward Gorey), a spirited account of his dealings with Claude Lochet, a stockbroker who, during the early 1990s, defrauded Vickrey and other residents of Orleans, Massachusetts, of their lifelong savings.

Although interest in Vickrey's precisely rendered figure paintings began to wane during the 1970s with the rise of Minimalism and Conceptual art, he retained his presence in the New York art world and beyond, regaining an even stronger audience with the resurgence of interest in Magic Realism in about 1980. (Hirschl & Adler Galleries, which organized the exhibition, *Robert Vickrey: Recent Work*, in 1979, was among the commercial galleries and museums promoting Vickrey's work during this period.)

Later in his career, Vickrey divided his time between his homes in Orleans and Naples, Florida. He continued to paint his “hauntingly suggestive” pictures until shortly before his death in Naples on April 17, 2011 (Vickrey, *Robert Vickrey: Artist at Work*, p. 29). He is represented in major public collections throughout the United States, including The High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia; The Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana; The Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The National Academy of Design, New York; the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.; and The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., among many others.

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