

The wall painting in the photograph below is the most recent of the three city walls that Knox Martin has done. The city is New York, specifically Manhattan. Although considered by his peers to be "an artist's artist", the response to Martin's walls makes it apparent that he is a "people's artist" also.

Martin is a fascinating man — knowledgable, articulate and cheerfully certain of who and what he is. His uncompromising presence and unalterable confidence would be intimidating in a less gentle man.

He has been a stunt pilot, a motorcyclist, a balloonist, and a Professor of Art at Yale University. While at Yale, Martin was named to WHO'S WHO IN AMERICA. He has had many one-man exhibitions and his work has been collected by such museums as the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, The Art Institute of Chicago, The University of California and the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. Martin's international credentials are impressive and the list of his accomplishments is much longer than we have room for here. His dues are definitely paid!

NJ interviewed Knox Martin at his Washington Heights apartment. What happened that afternoon was a communication that ranks with my first. It begins on page 10.

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"PROUD WOMAN WITH BICYCLE"

SPOTLIGHT



KNOX MARTIN IN THE SPOTLIGHT

by Randy Fordyce

NJJ: How do you make "fine art" understandable?

KNOX: What I usually do in talking about art, even to veteran artists, is let them know that there is such a thing as *real* art. This art is inexhaustable and it's a very specific thing; it's never arbitrary. It has rules that give it freedom. It's like... if you sat

a total novice at a piano, in short order he would become very repetitive, merely doing the same things over and over again. There's no exploration, no freedom because he can't *do* anything with it.

Suppose you had a goal to be one of the greatest artists of all time, where you'd go for data would be to a specific artist, one who's made himself heir to a lineage I call the "alpha" stream [a term coined by Knox Martin], a very narrow tight rope. A thin stream of incredibly powerful creativity flows from the alpha stream into tributaries, other branches of art, which are not as dedicated and deep

and which don't have to be as thoroughly understood.

NJJ: That's a very interesting concept. How would you describe the "alpha" artist and his work?

KNOX: It's technique, it's "in-tuneness", it's ability to see, and it's a lengthy process. The role the alpha artist makes himself heir to is not expected of the lay public. All great art, whether Mesopotamian, cave art, painting, Egyptian or Greek art is never antiquated in the sense that it now is "old hat" or has no significance. A piece of Greek art

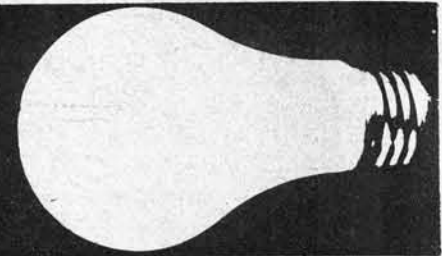


photo by Tim Geaney

seen in the light of present time is a powerfully aesthetic and evocative way of expanding one's ability to see new forms and exciting relationships, to enhance one's perceptions.

The elements in it are basically simple. The laws of variety would be: a straight against a curve, a thick against a thin, dark against light, large against small; with the spaces in between being as important as the forms they define. The amazing thing is that this develops in an organic way. There is an organic imperative which, once certain forms are put down, leads you and demands from you another surge. If you're thinking of

music and jazz, this straight/curved, thick/thin, etc., would apply. You'd think of pauses, intervals, thin sound, fatter sound; the jazz itself would have an organic relationship that would develop on a certain theme and then take off, perhaps.

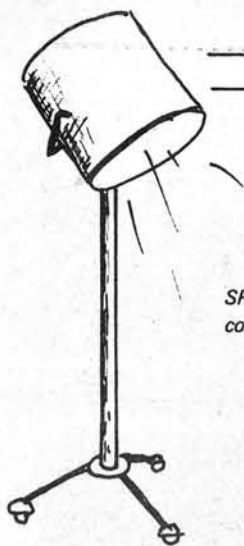
NJJ: If you had to get across the essence of *alpha art* in a very few words, what would you say?

KNOX: An *alpha line* work of art would be that work that you could see for the rest of your life and there would continue to be some new virtue in it. The best of illustrative art *illustrates* revelation. Alpha art IS revelation! Shakespeare said it

Artist Knox Martin holding his recent sculpture, "The Clock."

beautifully, "The poet's eye in a fine frenzy, rolling, doth glance from heaven to earth and earth to heaven, and from imagination bodies forth the shapes of things unknown, and to airy nothing gives a local habitation and a name." That's from *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

NJJ: That says it eloquently. Let's talk about the people who do that, the *alpha* artists. Obviously Picasso and Rembrandt are two that everyone

SPOTLIGHT
continues

knows; without trying to list them all, who are some we should know about, but perhaps don't?

KNOX: Titian is the greatest artist that ever lived. Any artist who would do anything, as far into the future as you want to go, would have to know Titian well. Cezanne was one of the most original artists of all time. A monster! Picasso said, "Cezanne is our father." Matisse, Valesquez, the great Dutch artists like Rubeens and Franz Hals, and his pupil Adriane Broweur, who was collected by Rembrandt.

NJJ: OK. Back to Knox Martin. How did you arrive at, or discover the concept of alpha art?

KNOX: Where I got that notion was not from any lecturer, not from any teacher, but by going to museums and sheerly looking and saying, "Wait a minute, there's more here than I had bargained for!"

NJJ: So you're saying before an artist can create on that level he needs to discover and learn what has been done before, as well as acquire the technique. What can you say about technique as it relates to the alpha artist?

KNOX: The alpha artist has got to be a virtuoso in performance; his technique must be impeccable. He must understand what composition is . . .

NJJ: How do you define composition?

KNOX: It's the idea of encoding within the choreography of the thing you're putting together a series of rhymes, an underground geometry in depth.

NJJ: How about an example?

KNOX: Okay, there's a painting on my easel and the tracery of the underground geometry has been worked over and set. I've taken responsibility for the entire thing in the sense of creating

the variety of the corners, the sides in relation to one another, the top and bottom in relation to the corners and the sides. The spaces in between the forms should be as charged as the forms themselves. In the alpha line, you take responsibility for every square molecule of the canvas. Then you have paint quality, design, color . . . each image that you put down could have as many as seven roles.

NJJ: Which are?

KNOX: Color, the shape itself, a bridge to something else, that it expands the side of the canvas, that it rhymes with the sleeve, that it sets up a pattern of rhythmicals diagonally throughout the whole thing . . .

NJJ: That's a very complex series of viewpoints. Certainly it goes far beyond the technique of illustration.

KNOX: This is not to vilify the illustrator in any way. He has his job, too. He might do a beautiful snow-capped mountain with some pine trees and a river and it would give you a sense of the freshness of the scene and would go on a calendar. It's intended, so to speak, that next month you can rip it off without missing it. The nitty-gritty of alpha art is interesting in that it is in the process of *creating nature*, and an alpha artist becomes aware of that.

Cezanne said, "It is but for us to add a link." Outside of that alpha line — if you haven't paid your dues, been to the museums fanatically, studied everything that's been done — you can't see the trees for the forest. In short, you cannot do a painting that does "the thing" unless you know what "the thing" is and what that kind of painting is, and unless you have the ability to do it at will. It has nothing to do with waiting for inspiration. It's a workaday, incredibly challenging task, magnificently complex.

NJJ: I have often heard that regardless of the approach — realism, impressionism, abstract or whatever — the study of anatomy is a must. Is that true?

KNOX: The notion that you *must* study anatomy is nuts because anatomy leads to anatomy, which is engineering. If you want to study and you want to be an artist, you study *art*. I was in the *Prado Museum* in Madrid and I walked into this room of original Greek sculpture and said, "I don't believe what I'm seeing!" I was shocked by the magnificence. I said, "What is this

phenomenon?" and then I got it. I was used to looking at Roman *copies* of the Greeks! In a crouching Venus, the creases in her waist would be put there for aesthetic reasons, (straight/curved, thick/thin, etc.). The elbow would be connected in such a way that it would follow that variety; the same with the crease in back of the knee and the shape of the thigh. So the Romans got hold of it and put anatomy into it, (engineering), and we lost the aesthetics of it. It's still great art, but it's not *magical* art that supersedes in a super-temporal way, as the Greek things do.

NJJ: That answers my question pretty definitively. All your answers seem to be more on the subject of how you came to your realization of *alpha* art.

KNOX: All of this takes you to the arena where alpha line creation becomes possible, and you come to this arena as a total professional artist. You're loaded because you have all of this under your belt. The other kind of artist is the kind that is loaded with a series of *ideas* and then illustrates them. Contrast that with the artist who, in an organic fashion, peels the whole thing away and is able then to "give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name."

I have a saying, "You start out with an idea and fortunately something else happens." When Stravinsky was composing he'd put the musical sheets up on the wall and look at them visually, getting new notions of juxtaposing certain chords; anything that would give him a break into this unknown area, to get out of the cliché. All these things are the instruments to woo that arena of the *non-cliche*, to be free of the common form or of the fashion.

NJJ: Okay, now that I'm educated to look past the immediate illustrative aspect of a piece, what should I look for?

KNOX: It's like peeling an onion. As you look and perceive more, you see that there is more to look at and perceive. Picasso said, "In a funny way, it's like there's nothing to understand. There's something to look at and something to know and there are keys to that knowing."

NJJ: Continuing with your analogy, when the onion is peeled and it's heart is exposed, what's there?

KNOX: It's as if the artist had gathered the woof and warp of the universe and put it on a canvas as

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photos by Tim Geaney

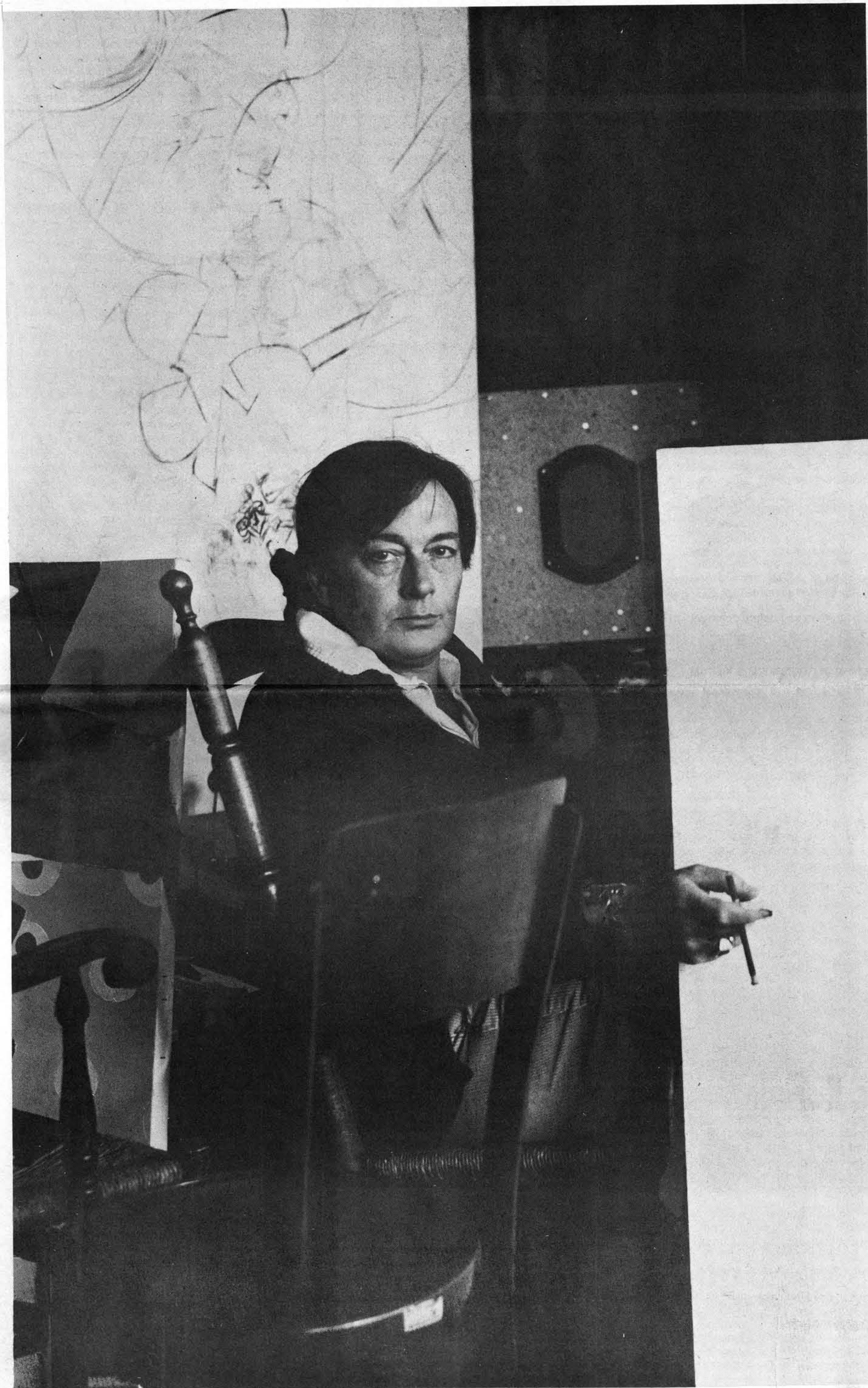
"You start out with an idea and fortunately something else happens."



"The alpha artist has got to be a virtuoso in performance."



"Humor is the central point of fine art."



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a fantastic metaphor. It's no longer $1 + 1 = 2$, it's $1 + 1 = 3$.

NJJ: That's more a spiritual equation than a mathematical one. Unquestionably, the act of creation is spiritual in nature, and it's expression is intensely personal. What does creating mean to you?

KNOX: It's a quickening and a heightening — a kind of ecstasy — with an ability to combine that energy with an intelligence that comes through all of it and brings the art to that point where there's kind of a fire. Like Prometheus' gift to mankind, the artist gives man fire. In other words, the being, in present time, on fire with these forms that he has clothed in a song, creates *soul food*.

NJJ: That's beautifully put. It's interesting that artists of all kinds invariably borrow from other arts, when describing their own forms. I'm getting the feeling that those *uncommon denominators* that NJJ is seeking are unavoidable.

KNOX: It seems to me that the most rounded of persons would be those who had under their belts the best of all poetry, the best of all music and the best of all painting.

NJJ: What part does humor play in fine art?

KNOX: Humor is the central point of fine art. My image for the alpha artist is the hero/trickster/raven/shape-shifter/star-thrower/mischief-maker. This I get from the Northwest Indians. On top of their totem poles they have a raven that can change his shape into anything.

For example — Adriane Broweur, who I told you before was collected by Rembrandt, did a painting that is about thirty inches by twenty-five inches. On the surface what you see is a man whose mouth is shaped into a rectangle and he's emitting some smoke out of his mouth; he has a pipe in one hand and a bottle of booze in the other. His hair is kind of unkempt and wild and he's looking out, slightly inebriated, with a somewhat glassy-eyed but penetrating gaze. If you look at it you say, "Gee, you know, this is a perverse subject to do as a masterpiece." Now imagine this painting being bought by Rembrandt, *when he was broke!* So you look at this painting, and the wiggling of the smoke is really a diagonal, the pipe forms another sense of a diagonal, the mouth is an exact rectangle, the bottle goes off to another corner and is repeated in a series of other floating rectangles, the face is made on a diamond shape. That's the under-geometry of this thing, a poetic geometry; so the work is deeply complex. And then there's the gorgeous paint quality.

The idea of looking at something that at first is perverse, (like what the hero/trickster/raven/shape-shifter/star-thrower/mischief-maker would do) would put you off. But then if you went further you would detect the most gorgeous paint quality ever made on the sleeve, in the hair, in the sky.

You "peel" that further back and you find that the smoke coming out of the pipe had another role, and another role, and another role, and so on.

NJJ: Would you say that that "perverseness" is an essential of alpha art?

KNOX: Yes. Picasso said that any great painting should be "filled with razor blades." Alpha art is always somewhat uncomfortable. It doesn't belong as a decorative piece in the home. It's disturbing, not in the sense of it being ugly, but that it moves one towards new concepts of *states of being*. Many people are uncomfortable with that.

NJJ: The combination of complexity, depth and incredibly significant relationships in alpha art sounds a bit overwhelming, almost forbidding. You're talking about a vast amount of work and study — a lot of dues!

KNOX: You do have to pay the dues. Nothing is for nothing; you can't get anything free. Whatever life you have is whatever life you've taken in. And so it is with art. Instead of resenting or feeling threatened by that, the artist should feel thrilled that there is something substantial and real that is at the apex of man's achievement; that there is a plateau of such sublimity that one *can* reach for and *have*. It's the most thrilling thing in the world to have that there instead of an emptiness!

NJJ: I'm glad to hear you say that because many young artists, visual and others, feel that they're "dreaming the impossible dream," striving to

reach an unattainable goal.

KNOX: It is finite. That's what the word "master" means, someone who's *mastered* their technique. A painter should know how to paint a painting, he should know what a painting is, where it came from; he should know what it's doing and should know what it can do. Being a master is simply a question of knowing that.

NJJ: When that mastery is accomplished, where do you go from there?

KNOX: Imagine something that is self-perpetuating once you have the ingredients of the thing itself, something to do *for the rest of your life*. Titian, who died at the age of 99, did his best work in his last years. On the alpha line, there *is* something you can go to like a great book; it is many things to man, and it feeds the artist, specifically the artist.

NJJ: I have the definite impression that only an alpha artist is qualified to be an art critic.

KNOX: You're absolutely, 100% right! A critic like Hilton Kramer, who just reviewed the Picasso show... his little trick is to review something and say, "He's great, he does this, he does that, he's his own man, BUT... blah blah blah, etc." In order to stand on the neck of the artist parasitically, and elevate himself, this wretched person says, "BUT..." and then goes on to vilify the work. To say Picasso is a great artist is like saying the sky is high and the ocean is deep, so when Kramer writes on Picasso, he pulls this same dirty trick. He says, "Picasso is a great blah blah blah, BUT... 'Guernica' is not a political statement, it's a continuation of his erotic statement." The town of Guernica has been bombed, a woman in flames is falling out of a window, there are dead children, freedom of the press has been impaled on a spear. It is a *tremendous* political statement, and Kramer says "erotic". He reminds me very much of the guy who goes to a psychiatrist, and the



"The artist should feel thrilled that there is something substantial and real that is at the apex of man's achievement."

NEWSFLASH!

CONFIRMED AT PRESS TIME. KNOX MARTIN HAS BEEN COMMISSIONED TO DO A NEW MAJOR WALL PAINTING—NEIMAN MARCUS WESTCHESTER BUILDING IN WHITE PLAINS, N.Y.—TO BE UNVEILED SEPTEMBER, 1980.

psychiatrist draws two straight lines and shows it to the guy, who then says, "Oh, that's a couple doing it." The psychiatrist says, "No, that's just two sticks there; you have a sexual problem." And the patient says, "But you're the one with the dirty pictures." Kramer has a "thing" about eroticism, he can't stand the erotic, so he tends to read it into all kinds of things. He is an illiterate and I will tell him so.

NJJ: I think you just did. What is your approach to teaching?

KNOX: I will look at a new student's work and find the dawn of something, and I'll say, "It's here. This section is a criticism of the rest the work; if you can take this and make the rest of it do what *this* is doing..." Gradually it will fill out to the point where only a corner will be off.

The great thing about teaching this way is that it's very precise. It's not at all arbitrary. I can point to and back up anything I say with any of these masters I've been talking about and say, "Look, it's here, it's there, it's here." The students get to the point where they can do this thing, *knowingly*. They can make forms move, they can spread their forms. They know what a metaphor is, what a plane is; they understand, first the words about what art is, then the concepts. After a while, instead of finding one small ingredient that's good in the work, you get down to nit picking where you say, "This corner is slightly off," and the student will say "Yes, I see it." You say, "Okay, now remedy it," and the student will remedy it. Someone who hasn't had the benefit of that kind of direct teaching and that precision, who's familiar with art, will then come to the work and say, "My God, that's good!" I'm talking about the difference between teaching from the viewpoint of what's *really* there, and attempting to teach from the viewpoint of *opinion*.

NJJ: That sounds very much like the concept of master and apprentice, where the learning doesn't come from explanations, but from observation and realization.

KNOX: Exactly right. The teacher points. What I say to a student is in reference to what I've learned from looking at these incredible people who have lived before.

Like Titian. A total master! As I've said, he developed and did his best work in his 96th year. That in a time when the average life span was 35 years (1500's), so he was like some kind of monster.

NJJ: Many of our readers know you best for the walls you have painted in New York, and I'm sure they would like you to talk about that.

KNOX: The walls are a great way to reach tremendous audiences, millions of people. The first, at 19th street and the West Side Highway, was called "Venus." At that time (1971) the highway drove into it, so it was very visible.

NJJ: Even without the highway, a ten-story painting is pretty visible!

KNOX: (Laughing.) That's true. When I was doing it, I spent months down there, drawing. I didn't want it to be just a studio blow-up, so I spent all the time I could there and I finally got what I wanted. As the work was going up, an interesting thing happened. In that vicinity there were hardhat workers, winos and lots of passers-by, and an extraordinary comradery developed.

I think that if one has paid his dues and puts together a thing like that in a truly fine way, it reaches a lot of people. For example: I went to my local pet shop, where I was known, but not by name. I asked the owner if I could write a check and he said, "Sure, you've been a customer for a long time." I wrote the check for some fish food and when he looked at my name on it, he said, "You're Knox Martin? I saw your piece on 19th Street and I want to tell you something. I hate modern art, but that's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen."

I finished the one at Houston and McDougal Streets last August and have gotten many calls from artists about how much they admire that particular piece. Wherever I've done these outdoor works, I've gotten that kind of response, so that's reaching — that's taking art out to the people.

NJJ: That is a vivid example of something I believe, art is not passive it's active.

KNOX: That's right. It's active as *hell*, and the art appreciator can't be passive either, he's got to participate like a sonofabitch! He's got to really go get it! The art is saying, "Here I am, where are you?" That's what it's *really* saying! ●