



Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

**The solidity of simple subjects:
Albert York's *Wheelbarrow* (1974)**

▼ Art

Ode on a Red Wheelbarrow

The spotlight finds painting's late, legendary recluse, Albert York

BY CHRISTIAN VIVEROS-FAUNÉ

America's favorite unknown painter, Albert York made pictures that appeared both essential and out of date the moment they were exhibited. From his first show in 1962 until his death in 2009, York carried on a reclusive love affair with still-life and landscape painting that endured through crucial developments like Abstract Expressionism, Pop, and Minimalism. While everyone else acted and reacted, York remained devoted to traditional genres. Today his tough charm exists in a constant state of being rediscovered — not unlike pork fat and dry martinis.

Introverted and reticent, the Detroit-born York became a successful artist despite doing just about everything to make himself disappear. He drifted to Manhattan in 1952, jobbed around, got married, and moved to Long Island before the art world ever took notice. Still, his fan base included the painter Fairfield Porter and ex-first lady Jacqueline Onassis — as well as major museums like the MOMA and the Met. Though they never met, York and paparazzi magnet Andy Warhol were exact contemporaries. While the latter channeled the extrovert appeal of Mick Jagger and Walt Whitman, the former was all Emily Dickinson. In a 1995 *New Yorker* profile, Calvin Tomkins called him “the most highly admired unknown artist in America.”

Now art writer Joshua Mack has teamed with Matthew Marks to mount “Albert York,” a mesmerizing show at the latter’s gallery in Chelsea. The duo bills the display of 37 small paintings, none of which measures more than 14 inches on a side, as the most comprehensive exhibition of the artist’s work to date. Its contents borrowed from public and private collections, the exhibition spans from 1963 to 1992. The endpoint marks the year York quit painting — after deeming several of

his contributions to a museum show “pretty lousy” — and, incredibly, turned exclusively to drawing.

The flipside of York’s career-crippling modesty was a Yankee cussedness the Midwesterner assimilated from living and working on Long Island most of his adult life. York’s humble subjects include copses of trees, single cows, vases of flowers, country landscapes, and the occasional human figure, either sitting on the grass or posing in period costume. What York’s paintings decidedly do not depict is modern-age East Hampton types: neither Wall Street traders nor local farmstand owners. Repeatedly, he pitted paint’s viscosity against the reality of things, at least as they existed in his memory.

Even today York’s pictures insist on the sturdy monumentality that inhabits the solidity of simple subjects. *Two Zinnias* (circa 1965), for one, depicts a pair of puce flowers resting on a cream-colored surface; their rounded petals and cut stems contrast strikingly with the panel’s black horizon, suggesting liftoff into nothingness. A second feat of visual compression is the artist’s imagist stunner *Wheelbarrow* (1974), a visual haiku so objective that if you concentrate, you can smell the chicken shit (and hear William Carlos Williams).

York painted most objects as though he were seeing them for the first time — reminiscent of Cezanne, who made portraits, landscapes, and still lifes with similar dogged gumption. That went double for his human figures, which turn weird thanks to certain uncanny Yorkian touches: art-historical poses, iconoclastic dress, and scumbled faces. Pictures like *Indian Brave and Indian Chief* (1978) and *Oriental Figures in Landscape* (1977) portray not people, whom we know York tended to avoid, but ideal types, which the artist was very much into distilling. Stocky, totemic presences in turbans and feather headdresses, these extravagances proved to be York’s stock-in-figure. Like potted geraniums and farm equipment, cliché itself — genre in modern garb — made them fixable in oil paint.

“Albert York”

Matthew Marks Gallery
523 West 24th Street
212-243-0200, matthewmarks.com
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