

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
515 WEST 26TH STREET
NEW YORK NY 10001
212 397 0742
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

Rudolf Baranik

Napalm Elegies (Paintings 1967–74)

March 29 – May 12, 2018

Panel Discussion: Wednesday, May 9, 6:30–8PM

RYAN LEE is pleased to present *Napalm Elegies (Paintings 1967–74)*, an exhibition of selected works from artist and activist Rudolf Baranik's (1920–1998) powerful series of paintings made in response to the atrocities of the Vietnam War. Between 1967 and 1974, Baranik created some 30 paintings based on a newspaper image of a Vietnamese child badly burned by napalm. Using a range of white and gray tones on deep black grounds, Baranik reproduced the image in fragmented arrangements of paint and collage. Honing in on the potency of napalm as “the primary outcry symbol, a signifier of the anguish [Americans] felt about the war,” Baranik used this image in paintings as well as posters he created for Angry Arts Week, a massive anti-war protest event organized by New York City artists in 1967.¹ In works such as *Napalm Elegy: White Silence* (1970), Baranik's sensitive abstraction of human suffering elicits a sense of melancholy and loss that is both specific to the contemporaneous conflict and as old as war itself. The painting's deep black upper register contrasts starkly with the luminosity of the white napalmed heads sparsely painted below. In the center, the head appears again alongside fragmented forms—possibly other limbs. In varying saturations of gray and black, the abstracted central image is both haunting and visceral, oscillating between transparency and opacity, between x-ray and excavation.

The *Napalm Elegies* unite two central concerns of postwar American painting: the expression of (war-wrought) existential angst and the exploration of pure form. Baranik frequently described his creative practice as ‘socialist formalism’—a style that eschewed the division between art of conscience and Greenbergian formalism. For Baranik, his painted forms were inherently imbued with his social, political and moral convictions. In a 1991 issue of *Art Papers* he explained,

“Yes I am a formalist. I have said many times that I am a ‘socialist-formalist,’ not as a challenge but as an accurate summation of what I believe ‘Socialist’ (meaning humanist) stands for: the artist's desire that art better life; ‘Formalist’ stands on guard in the defense of art's poetic options and freedom, of its independence of mundane usefulness. Because, you see, form has already taken in all considerations. I believe my formal sense of *the moment* to be as pure as possible *to me* and that is the truest filter in a moral sense as well as a visual one.”²

Baranik was well-versed in the formalist concerns of his abstract expressionist peers and felt particular “kinships,” as he called them, with artists Robert Motherwell (1915–1991) and Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967). Like Reinhardt, Baranik was attuned to the transcendent power of the color black. The “radical blackness” of Baranik's paintings was, according to art historian and philosopher Donald Kuspit, a major source of their character and force. Kuspit writes, “Baranik's achievement is to fuse Kandinsky's sense of the fatality and mortality conveyed by blackness with Reinhardt's sense of it as the embodiment of both loss and transcendence of the self.”³ Anchored firmly in both the profoundly human and the poetic, the *Napalm Elegies* and Baranik's art of conscience always allow for the possibility of redemption, the possibility of hope.

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On Wednesday, May 9 at 6:30pm, RYAN LEE will host a panel discussion with Lucy Lippard, Dr. Patricia Hills, Alejandro Anreus and Matthew Israel.

Rudolf Baranik (b. 1920 Lithuania – d. 1998 Eldorado, New Mexico) was a painter, writer and lifelong political activist. After immigrating to the United States in 1938 and serving in the American army during World War II, Baranik studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and Art Students League in New York City. In 1948, he and his wife, artist May Stevens, moved to France and attended the Académie Julian in Paris on the GI Bill, while Baranik also studied under Fernand Léger. In 1951, the couple returned to New York City, where their Soho loft became a hotbed for artistic-political gatherings with their contemporaries, including Leon Golub and Nancy Spero. Baranik and Stevens were staunch advocates of Civil Rights, feminism, prison reform and numerous anti-war movements. In 1967, Baranik assisted with organizing Angry Arts Week, and in the late 1960s, he co-founded Artists and Writers Protest Against the Vietnam War. In the 1970s, he and Stevens founded Artists Meeting for Cultural Change with Benny Andrews and Lucy Lippard. Baranik firmly believed that his political involvement could not be separated from his abstract painting, coining the term “socialist formalism” to describe his practice. Baranik was a professor at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn for 25 years and a distinguished writer who contributed to Artforum. In 1997, Baranik and Stevens moved to Eldorado, New Mexico.

Notable solo exhibitions include Jersey City Museum (2004); University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson (2000); Exit Art/The First World, New York (1994); University Gallery of Fine Art at Ohio State University, Columbus (1987); and Boston University Art Gallery (1987). Baranik’s work is held in the public collections of Brooklyn Museum; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, Ithaca; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. In 1981, Baranik was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship in Fine Arts, and in 1997, he was the subject of the book, *Poetics and Politics in the Art of Rudolf Baranik* by David Craven with a foreword by Elizabeth Hess.

For press inquiries, please contact Bridget Casey at bridget@ryanleegallery.com or 212-397-0742.

¹ Rudolf Baranik quoted in Matthew Israel, *Kill for Peace: American Artists Against the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 97.

² Rudolf Baranik, *Art Papers*, Nov/Dec 1991.

³ Donald Kuspit, “Rudolf Baranik: An Overview” in *Rudolf Baranik: The Napalm Elegies* (Jersey City: Jersey City Museum, 2004), 23-24.