

# eric firestone gallery

A fixture of the art community in Western New York, **Sally Cook** (b. 1932, Buffalo, NY) is a painter and poet who captures the absurdity and whimsy of ordinary life. While Cook was a significant figure in the postwar New York art scene, her figurative canvases—which resonate with those of canonical artists ranging from Florine Stettheimer to Frida Kahlo—have flown under the radar outside of Buffalo. The artist's fantastical approach to portraiture and still life reflects her incisive and witty observations of the world.

Cook attended the Albright Art School in Buffalo in the mid-1950s, where she trained with painters such as Seymour Drumlevitch and Peter Busa—the latter of whom encouraged her move to downtown New York. Cook took up residence on the Bowery and immersed herself in the historic Tenth Street cooperative gallery scene. While she was always drawn to figuration, Cook became part of the Abstract Expressionist movement that reigned in New York City. The painter developed her own abstract style defined by mushrooming amorphous forms of vivid natural color. She became a member of the Camino, Phoenix, and Feiner galleries, presenting her work in solo exhibitions as well as group shows with the likes of Willem de Kooning, Alice Neel, and Franz Kline. Cook was also elected to join the legendary Artists' Club established by de Kooning, Kline, and Hans Hoffman.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the famed 1913 Armory Show that introduced modernism to the United States, Cook in 1963 was profiled on the CBS television series *Eyewitness* as an exemplary painter continuing the legacy of that art movement. Cook was one of only two living artists—the other being Marcel Duchamp—who were featured in that program.

In the late 1960s, however, Cook grew restless with the dominance of the New York School and its restrictive formalism. She returned to the Buffalo area and earned an MA in American Studies from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1971. Her painting practice transitioned from abstract expressionism to geometric abstraction to, finally, portraiture and still life. Yet her early canvases—teeming with colorful marks and shapes in surreal compositional configurations—are not divorced from her later works. They set the stage for her highly imaginative tableaux of figures, animals, and objects rendered in a naive style.

The artist often portrays herself, her husband Bob Fisk, her pets, and members of her community in vibrant scenes of magical realism. For example, *Portrait of Another Friend* (1973) represents John Crawford, who managed an art glass shop in town. Cook watched Crawford from afar as he took daily walks around her neighborhood. She describes him as almost seven-feet tall and always dressed in colorful long robes. As Cook explained:

*This was a painting waiting to be painted. I knew I had to transfer him to canvas. Since height was his most prominent characteristic, I thought that dividing his layers of clothing into a gradual transitioning of changing perspectives would work. These planes, moving up or down the figure, would give the illusion of extreme height. ... Even though I hardly knew him, I titled it Portrait of Another Friend, as he looked interesting and like someone I would like to know better. It*

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*didn't take long for John [Crawford] to hear about the portrait. He immediately stopped by and bought it.*

Cook's canvases convey how life can be stranger than fiction. Reality and fantasy blur in her works. In one self-portrait called *I Go to Africa* (1971), Cook replaces lions on the savannas with small domestic cats in a dreamlike landscape with invented vegetation. The artist depicts herself levitating in the air, holding "the flag of the individual; a symbol of creative power" (in her words). Cook's dreams become lived experiences in her painterly output.

The artist was recently the subject of the solo exhibition *Sally Cook: 1960–Present*, March–May 2020, University of Buffalo Art Galleries. Her works are found in the collections of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, NY; Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo, NY; and the William H. Littlefield Collection at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, among others.

Cook is also an accomplished poet whose verses have been published in numerous journals. Among other scholarships and awards, Cook received a grant to research Emily Dickinson and T. S. Eliot, which culminated in a series of painted portraits of Dickinson. Indeed, her poetry and painting practices often cross-pollinate.

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