

# Manhattan Arts

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Raoul Dufy, *Open Window, Nice*, 1928, oil on canvas, 25 1/2" x 21 1/4". The Art Institute of Chicago. From "Raoul Dufy: Last of the Fauves", a traveling exhibition organized by the Norton Museum of Art, in Florida.



# Ivan Karp

## Making History As It Happens

**1**999 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the illustrious O.K. Harris Gallery, currently located at 383 West Broadway. O.K. Harris' owner, legendary art dealer Ivan Karp, remembers when his 7,000 square foot exhibit space was the largest gallery space in the city. Then, situated at 465 West Broadway (just north of the current space), Karp's pioneer showcase was also the first visible ground floor gallery in SoHo. There, Karp helped launch the careers of many of the world's leading Hyperrealist painters, beginning in 1969. It was Karp, too, in the 1960s, who brought out the work of such twentieth century masters as Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Mark Rothko and Robert Rauschenberg at the renowned Leo Castelli Gallery, where he was Castelli's director of exhibitions for ten years.

In a recent interview with Donna Cameron, Karp discussed how his SoHo gallery has catalyzed the development of the SoHo district from a decaying, abandoned slum to a world-class fine arts center. Appropriately referred to as "The Sage of SoHo", Karp is committed to showing the best art being produced today and educating art viewers in the process. The gallery presents five exciting exhibitions each month in its 10,000 square foot space.

**DC:** What artist inspired you to become an art dealer?

**IK:** Caravaggio.

**DC:** O.K. I'll rephrase that. In 1969, what then-living artist inspired you to deal in art?

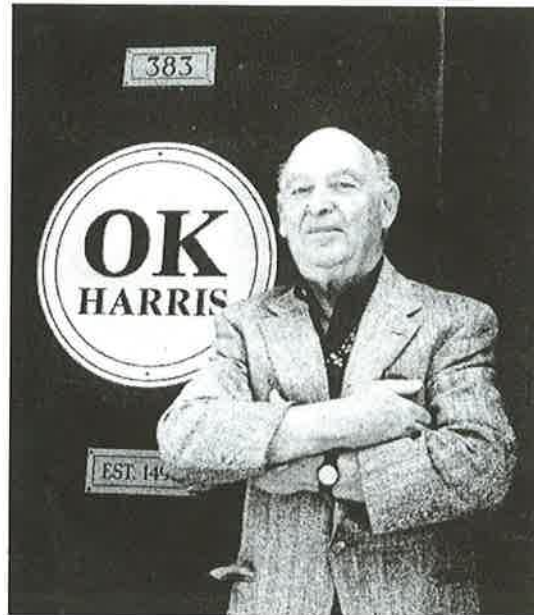


Photo credit Donna Cameron.

*We feel that it's our role and our obligation to help people uncover the mystery of the arts for themselves. Specifically of our own exhibitions... We don't mind the audience coming in to watch the installation process... We enjoy seeing it happen. It's part of the mystique of gallery operation.*

**IK:** My arts personality developed during the abstract expressionist period. It was when most of us, in the small arts community that there was at that time, shared responses to the heroes of the period – Pollock, De Kooning, Kline, Rothko. In 1955, Kline was my favorite. I was a reviewer for the *Village Voice* and I did an interview with him. It was a very significant moment in my development.

I went to work at Leo Castelli Gallery by invitation. And willingly so, because of Rauschenberg's work and Johns' work, which I had shown there for the first time. I had thought that maybe these two artists represented a significant development outside of abstract expressionism – a breakthrough, sort of – and I wanted to be there with it. And that's when I joined Leo. I was the reason Johns and Rauschenberg were showing there. Shortly thereafter, Twombly. I participated in the Castelli Gallery, where I was the first to identify works by Lichtenstein, Warhol and many others.

**DC:** Could you extrapolate on how you were responsible for the development of this neighborhood as a prima arts district?

**IK:** Well, this was an old industrial district in serious physical decline. West Broadway alone, which we call the Champs-Elysees of SoHo, had only four or five commercial premises. The buildings were in a state of dishevelment, and the streets were empty. The fact that we opened a bright, lively spirited facility here on this street, allowed for the possibilities of some uptown galleries to consider the kinds of spaces that were available here. I had been an art dealer for ten years, already. My own personal activity was well known. People came to see me. They saw the space and they asked about the

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which is to show the very best work being produced in our time.***

rent. At the time, when we first moved down here, it was \$300 a month for 7,000 square feet. Within 2 years there were five or six galleries here. But that derived specifically from our activity here. It has since become a landmark district. I think that our presence here is definitely the inspiration for the development of the neighborhood.

**DC:** How did you arrive at the name "O.K. Harris"?

**IK:** Originally, the prominent collector Robert Skull wanted to open a gallery and asked Dick Bellamy and I to come up with a list of possible names for the space. At the top of the list was "Oil & Steel", which Bellamy later used for his Gallery, and I went with "O.K. Harris." (Skull didn't like either of these names.) I subsequently used it in the early 1960s in a gallery space in Provincetown and later, in a fiction which I wrote, *Doobie Doo*, published in 1965 by Doubleday. The book was about the art world, with Lichtenstein's picture of the crying girl on the front cover and Warhol's portrait of me on the back cover. It was the name of the gallery in the story, which was a romance.

In short, the name "O.K. Harris" was pulled out of a hat. I made it up to represent a universal American name. It's memorable and serves us well.

**DC:** Are you a native New Yorker?

**IK:** Yes, I was born in the City. Lived here all my life and I know it well. A denizen of Brooklyn for many years, and still a loyal visitor. My family background is very disconnected from fine arts activity. My father and mother were always very respectful of the arts and we were regular visitors to the Brooklyn Museum, for many years. Art is something that I found my way to by circuitous and curious means. I have no formal training in the arts whatsoever, in fact, I'm a High School dropout.

**DC:** That's amazing. Do you do offsite exhibits or any other service through this gallery?

**IK:** Yes... consultations on about how a career should develop... Of course this gallery functions much like a museum. Five shows at a time – there's always something intriguing. We receive groups from schools and fine arts facilities from all over the country frequently. We give regular spontaneous lectures here. And, without a fee. If you want to bring your group at any time, we'd be glad to prepare a speech.

**DC:** You're providing a great contribution to arts education in New York City.

**IK:** We feel that it's our role and our obligation to help people uncover the mystery of the arts for themselves. Specifically of our own exhibitions.

**DC:** What about genre? You've developed a reputation as a champion of realism.

**IK:** I have no specific preference for realism. When I opened the gallery in 1969, the best thing that I saw was hyperrealist painting. The first show was five abstractionists and a realist. So we started out with abstract painting. But the best paintings, which I saw during the interval, were hyperrealist paintings. Richard McAllen, Robert Becton, John Soot, Robert Cunningham – these are artists who appeared on my premises, with evidence of their work, during that interval. We've never given up abstract painting here. We show as much abstract painting as we do realist painting.

We've been pigeonholed. Critics and art journalists have decided that we are a hyperrealist gallery, but we are not. Although we do have some of the best hyperrealist painters in the world, we also have terrific abstract painters, and we show abstract painting and sculpture here all the time.

We show photography on a regular basis. We were one of the first fine arts galleries to show photography, in 1970. We've had 245 shows of photography – first class professional work. And we've had one review in *The New York Times*. 245 Exhibitions! It's a world's record.

**DC:** Your gallery reflects the energy and diversity one feels on the streets of New York. Is this intentional?

**IK:** Oh, yes. The planning for exhibitions concerns which artists we are going to show with which artist. We try to create a balance from exhibition to exhibition, so that you don't have all realists one month, or all abstractionists one month, or all sculptors or photographers. Balance makes for an exciting interplay from room to room. There's going to be something for you here to look at that's lively, spirited, provocative, and an opportunity for surprises from room to room.

We do five exhibitions every month, which is more than any fine arts gallery in the country, as far as I know, and more than almost any museum. We have a wonderful time doing it. It's a strenuous task. Most galleries close for installation for the entire week to show four or five paintings. I don't do that. We never close. But we do it with incredible expertise. My installation man is probably the best in the country. We don't mind the audience coming in to watch the installation process. We don't find them disruptive or anything like that. We enjoy seeing it happen. It's part of the mystique of gallery operation.

**DC:** What about the future?

**IK:** We think in terms of growth and expansion, our relations with other galleries, and trying to get our artists' work shown in other galleries and museums around the country. We work at that. We're very proud of our achievement. We know that what it's been will enter into the fabric of art history. Here, at the gallery, we're a family. I am totally dedicated to my profession. It's a treacherous activity, art dealership. You go through protracted intervals where nothing happens. You get no reaction to the work that you're exhibiting. If you don't see a museum curator turn up you don't get reviewed for months at a time. These are disheartening elements. But, we plan to persist in the face of it. We are dedicated to our proposition, which is to show the very best work being produced in our time.