



IRVING NORMAN (1906-1989)**The Human Condition****NORMAN004**

Signed verso, "I. Norman" and titled, "The Human Condition"

oil on canvas

120 x 182 in. (187 x 122 1/2 x 1 1/2 in.)

304.8 x 462.28 cm (474.98 x 311.15 x 3.81 cm)

1980-1981

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PROVENANCE:

Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento
Private Collection

EXHIBITION:

1986 Alternative Museum, New York
2002 Santa Monica College
2006 Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento
2007 Pasadena Museum of California Art
2007 Utah State Univ. Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art
2007 American University Katzen Museum, Washington, D.C.

LITERATURE:

Dark Metropolis: Irving Norman's Social Surrealism, ed. Scott A. Shields and Ray Day (Sacramento and Berkeley: The Crocker Art Museum and Heyday Books, 2006), pg. 199

Irving Norman conceived and created *The Human Condition* at a time when he must have reflected deeply on the totality of his life. Given its grand scale and cinematic treatment, it impresses as a profound culmination of his artistic journey, synthesizing decades of themes, insights, and experiences into a single monumental work. A man of great humility and an artist of uncommon skill, he translated a horrendous war experience into impactful allegories of unforgettable, often visceral imagery. He worked in solitude with relentless forbearance in a veritable vacuum without fame or financial security. Looking to the past, acutely aware of present trends, he knew, given the human predicament, he was forecasting the future. As one New York Times reviewer mused in 2008, "In light of current circumstances, Mr. Norman's dystopian vision may strike some...as eerily pertinent," an observation that recalled recent events.

Irving Norman's figures, manipulated by their environment and physical space, are of a style that exaggerates the malleability of the human form to underscore their vulnerability and subjugation. This literal and symbolic elasticity suggests that these figures are stretched, compressed, or twisted by the forces of their environment, emphasizing their lack of autonomy and the oppressive systems that govern their existence. While these figures reflect vulnerability, Norman's structural choice in *The Human Condition* creates a stark juxtaposition that shifts attention toward the central tableau. A commanding female figure, rising above the calamitous failures and atrocities of the past, is joined by a man, forming a symbolic "couple," suggesting the unity and shared responsibility of a new vision. Their hands, magnified and upturned, present these

children as a vision offering hope and renewal for the future. The gesture, combined with the futuristic clothing of the diminutive figures, reinforces the idea of an alternative path—a brighter, forward-looking humanity. The central tableau acts as a metaphorical offering, inviting the viewer to consider a future untouched by the weight of darkness from which these figures emerge.

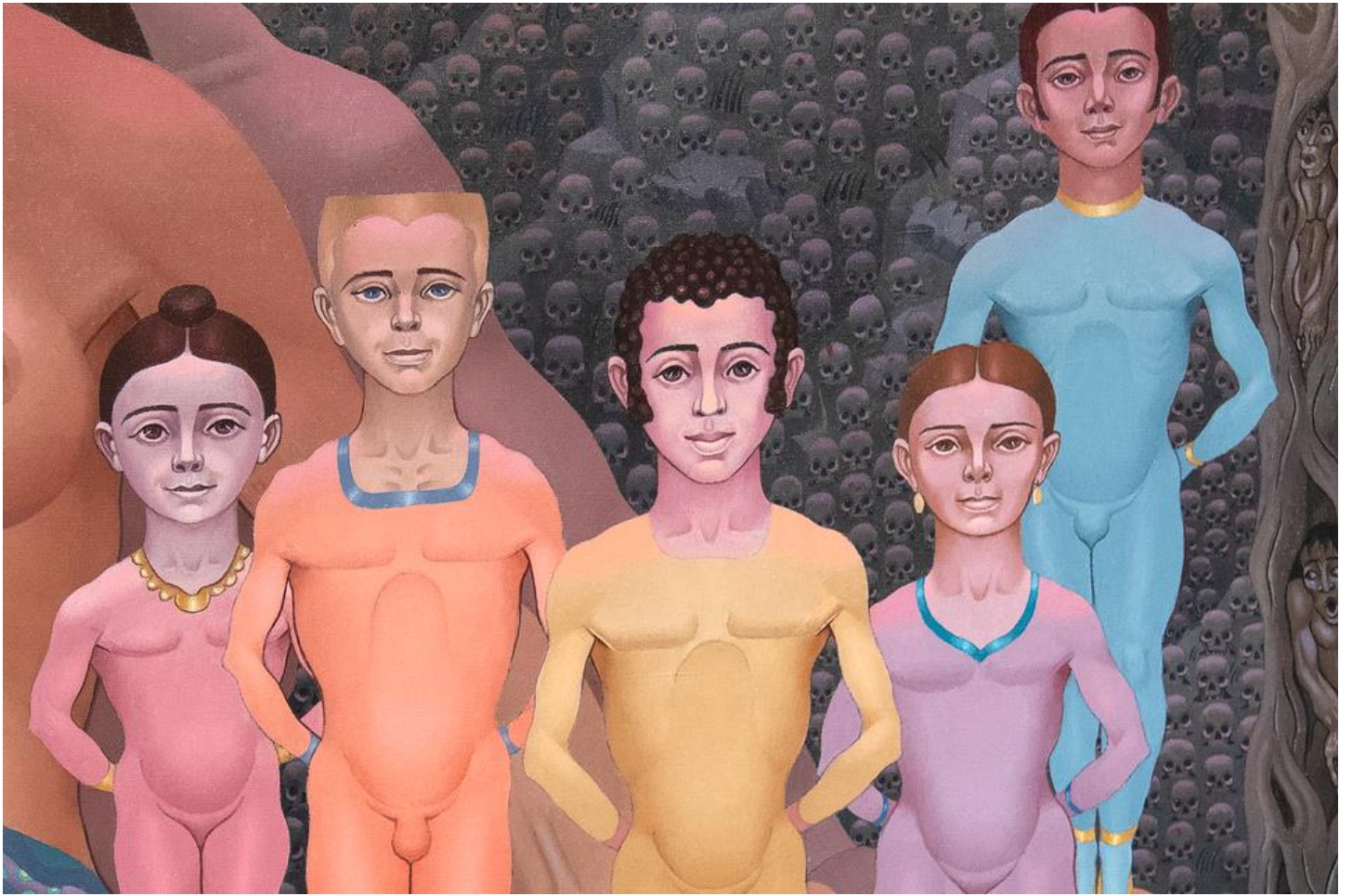
Here, Norman underscores a hopeful, if not optimistic, vision for generations ahead. The structural decision suggests a deliberate shift in focus: the darker scenes relegated to the sides represent the burdens, past and present. At the same time, the central figures embody the potential for a future shaped by resilience and renewal. This juxtaposition distinguishes *The Human Condition* as a reflection of Norman's later years, where a tempered hope emerges to claim the high ground over the war-mongering, abject corruption, frantic pleasure-seeking, and the dehumanizing effects of modern society.

Throughout his long career, Norman stood tall in his convictions; he turned, faced the large, empty canvases, and designed and painted complex, densely populated scenes. As for recognition, he rationalized the situation—fame or fortune risked the unsullied nature of an artist's quest. Ultimately, *The Human Condition* is a summation of Norman's life and work and a call to action, urging us to examine our complicity in the systems he so vividly depicted. Through meticulous craftsmanship and allegorical intensity, it is a museum-worthy masterwork that continues to resonate, its themes as pertinent today as they were when Norman painstakingly brought his vision to life.

The Lithuanian-American artist Irving Norman was a social surrealist who painted large-scale and highly detailed critiques of contemporary life with hopes that viewers would consider the consequences of their actions and change their behavior. Influenced by the dire conditions of the Great Depression, his massive canvases feature armies of clone-like figures behaving in the clockwork manner in which they have been programmed. He moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1934 before helping to defend the Spanish Republic from the fascist Franco dictatorship. He survived the Spanish Civil War and in 1939 settling on Catalina Island off the Southern California coast, where he began drawing and painting from the atrocities he had witnessed. In 1940, he moved to San Francisco and had a solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art two years later. He then traveled to Mexico City and saw the murals of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros before moving to New York City to studying at the Art Students League from 1946 to 1947. He returned to San Francisco in the late 1940s. In 1988, fire destroyed his home, studio, artwork, and personal papers.

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