

Allen Berke and Lise Soskolne
ESTHETIC BOMB SHELTER
Organized by Lise Soskolne
May 28–July 19, 2025

After painting for more than three decades, Allen Berke's sudden death in 2003 cut short a life's work – indexing in paint the essence of totalitarianism. The inventory he left behind is as vast as it is consistent in its depictions of martial law, social control, and human destructiveness. While very little remains of Berke's working notes, on an undated scrap of lined paper under the heading *War*, he pencilled the words *esthetic bomb shelter*.

Born in Detroit in 1948, Berke is said to have often drawn pictures of war as a child. In 1970, at age 22, he was delivered into the era's violent political epicenter by a fellowship at Kent State University. The killing that year of 4, and the wounding of 9 unarmed student protesters on campus by the Ohio National Guard, likely manifested for Berke what had until then only existed for him on paper.

When he relocated to New York in 1983, Berke delivered himself into the cultural and commercial epicenter of another era – the East Village of the 1980s. His participation in 58 group shows during its feverish rise and fall was proportional to the 176 storefront galleries that opened in less than a square mile below 14th Street between 1981 and 1988. To local residents displaced by the postmodern avant garde, each new gallery must have landed like an esthetic bomb. To bohemians working in and living up that decade, each new storefront must have been another esthetic bomb shelter.

Berke was not a resident or a bohemian. A public school teacher by day who lived in Queens, Berke's preoccupation with what he saw as *society's moral bankruptcy* would have precluded the kind of ironic participation in denuded commercialism that defined much of the Capital A art world of that time. Instead, and likely because of his earnestness, Berke's paintings were mischaracterized as neo-expressionism, a movement that emerged in the 1970s in reaction to the strict conventions of conceptual and minimal art.

Critics described Berke as “working paint with emotion” in “torturous personal turmoil” using “bold spontaneous brushstrokes” that “surge with raw power.” Though not intentional, these reviews may have contributed to the reduction of his painting into something of a basic aesthetic category when in fact, Berke had skillfully used photojournalism as source material for decades. His notes suggest that he well understood journalistic photography's deployment in painting to be a secondary process of mediation. The first, as he noted, was the *media-generated fiction of accouterments of power*. The gestural moves Berke experimented with were a strategic effort to find the right vehicle for his subject, not his subjectivity.

Berke left New York in 1991 and returned to Michigan where he continued to paint and teach until his death. This exhibition was conceived in May of 2024; I selected the paintings in early 2025 without knowing that Berke was likely to have made most of them during his years in New York. All of my paintings were also made in New York: two in early 2025 for Berke, and the other two in 2005 and 2013 for me. None have been shown before.

What doesn't seem to have been legible then might be legible today. For if not now, then when? Then again, the essence of totalitarianism can never be fully visible from inside an esthetic bomb shelter.

– Lise Soskolne

Allen Berke (1948–2003, Detroit) was an American painter whose work probed the intersections of social control, masculinity, and political violence. Emerging from Detroit during an era of profound social upheaval, Berke earned his M.F.A. from Wayne State University in 1971. A public school teacher and artist for nearly three decades, he moved to New York in 1983 where he exhibited extensively during the rise and fall of the East Village scene. Before returning to Detroit in 1991, Berke participated in more than 50 group exhibitions alongside Colab, Greer Lankton, and Martin Wong, among many others, and at galleries including ABC No Rio, Nada, No Se NO, Nolo Contendere, Now, P.A.C.A., Tobe Art International, and Vox Populi (American Fine Arts, Co.). Berke maintained a strong presence in Detroit during the 1980s and 90s with solo exhibitions at Xochipilli Gallery in Birmingham, MI, as well as in New York at NYU's 80 Washington Square East, P.S.1, and The Pharmacy. Berke was shown internationally at Arte Studio '88 (Italy), the Osaka Museum (Japan), Adam Gallery (UK), and the 2nd International Olympia Exhibition (UK). His final solo exhibition took place at the Swords Gallery in Detroit in 1998.

Lise Soskolne (b. Toronto, CA, 1971) has lived and worked in New York since the late 1990s. Among many others, she is a co-founder of Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) and has been its core organizer since 2012. Prior solo exhibitions include Lars Friedrich, Berlin (2023); Ulrik, New York (2022); Kunstverein Nürnberg, Nürnberg (2020); Svetlana, New York (2020); Mishkin Gallery at Baruch College, New York (2019); The Middler, New York (2018); Diorama, Oslo (2015); Modern Culture, New York (2001); Artists Space, New York (1999). Recent institutional group exhibitions include Raven Row, London (2025); Backrooms, Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich (2024); and Kunstverein München, Munich (2020).