

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Sam SZAFRAN (Paris 1934 - Paris 2019)

The Staircase at 54, rue de Seine, Paris

Watercolour on silk.

Signed Szafran at the lower right.

172 x 471 mm. (6 3/4 x 18 1/2 in.)

Drawn in 1991, the watercolour depicts one of Szafran's favourite subjects, the staircase in the apartment building at 54 rue de Seine in Paris, seen from above in steep perspectival foreshortening. Szafran began making pastel drawings and photographs of the spiral staircase in the 1960's, studying it from multiple viewpoints and attempting to capture something of the sense of vertigo one felt when looking down the stairwell from a high floor. He returned to the theme in the 1990's in such works as the present sheet, painted in watercolours on Chinese silk. These later works are largely based on his photographs and memories of the escalier, and in many of them the staircase seems to float in space, and at times becoming even more abstract in conception, flattened out and spread open like a fan.

Sometimes just the balustrade remains, curving and twisting into the centre of the composition.

Szafran has described the origin of this motif in his work: 'One evening I was working in this staircase – I've always lived in stairwells – and I fell asleep. It was night and I had a nightmare. I woke up and it was the full moon. There was a shadow falling from the window onto the steps of the staircase. I saw it suddenly – I had passed by a thousand times without seeing it and suddenly I noticed it, so I decided to draw it. But the shadow moved every three minutes...the earth turns...There was a slice of light here, while everywhere else was dark. I drew by the light of a flashlight until everything became dark. At one point, everything that had been very dark became light and everything light became dark. To create the whole, I had to keep moving. I was forced to identify myself with a spider, who ascends and descends the end of his thread.'

As the artist's friend James Lord has described these works, 'Plunging views of vertiginous staircases repeated sometimes again and again on the same sheet with shifting, dizzying variations in points of view, intense but fastidious in color, nearly supernatural in the cadenza virtuosity of execution, verging almost upon abstraction though never quite letting slip the desperate affirmation of a specific subject matter, within which we can occasionally make out, as if glimpsed sidelong in the galactic swirl, the tiny, lovely, fragmentary semblance of a human being. Staircases that begin nowhere and lead everywhere, start from nothing and end in everything, where descending is forever ascending and the fullness of emptiness is dense as a white dwarf. Spirals of stair railings tracing the continuum eked out of invisible space which nonetheless balloons beneath coffered skylights and out of windows bluer than the sky...

Szafran's staircases...are the output of an eye dedicated to the absolutism of its own experience, disciplined by self-effacement before what sight alone can convey to the senses but submissive at the same time to the sublimating want of self-expression...Seeing Szafran shows how wonderfully well looking can think.'

Artist description:

Born Samuel Berger in Paris in 1934 to Polish immigrants, Sam Szafran took the maiden name of his mother when he began to sign his works in the 1960s. Although he was briefly enrolled at the Académie

de la Grande-Chaumière in Paris in the mid-1950s, Szafran was largely self-taught as an artist. He exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants in 1957 and two years later at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. While his earliest work was based in abstraction, from around 1960 onwards he began to depict representational subjects, drawn in pastel, charcoal or watercolour. Content with studying a limited range of themes - notably studio interiors, staircases and plant forms - Szafran produced numerous drawings, each characterized by a very skillful handling of the medium and an abiding interest in perspectival effects. From 1965 Szafran's work was exhibited extensively in France, and also in Switzerland, but only rarely elsewhere. He contributed to the Nouvelle Subjectivité exhibitions curated by Jean Clair in Paris in 1976 and in Brussels in 1979. A retrospective exhibition of drawings, pastels, watercolours and sculptures was held at the Fondation Pierre Gianadda in Martigny, Switzerland, in 1999-2000, and was followed by further retrospectives at the Max Ernst Museum in Brühl in 2010-2011 and the Fondation Gianadda in 2013. Following Szafran's death in 2019, a large commemorative exhibition at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris in 2022-2023 drew some 330,000 visitors.

A permanent gallery devoted to Szafran's work was established in 2015 at the Fondation Gianadda in Martigny, while other works by the artist are today in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre National d'Art Contemporain, the Musée d'Orsay and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.