

LUISE ROSS

GALLERY

For Immediate Release

Victor Joseph Gatto (1893-1965)

As a young boy in school, Victor Joseph Gatto had one talent that made him stand out from his classmates: he could draw. This ability led to perhaps the most significant event early on in what turned out to be a hardscrabble life for Gatto, and one which he himself would proudly recount again and again. President Theodore Roosevelt visited the “home” where young Gatto had been sent after the early death of his mother, and his drawings were part of the decorations welcoming the president. Of course, “TR” complimented the youngster highly and declared a bright future awaited him as a successful artist. Predictably, things continued to go downhill for Gatto, but the president’s prophecy for him, albeit postponed for half a lifetime, would come true to a degree.

At about the age of forty-five, with the encouragement of starving artist neighbors in Greenwich Village’s Little Italy--of which there were many in the late 1930’s--and perhaps out of simple desperation, Gatto began to paint. And he did so the way he lived: hard, aggressively, obsessively. Working in oil, building up layer after layer of paint, brushes tailored for minute detail with most of the hairs pulled out, he worked at his new job full-time and on individual canvases for days at a time without sleep. Obviously self-taught, he gradually developed a reputation as a visionary primitive, painting imagined utopian and biblical subjects and resonant images of New York City. In the early forties, the Whitney Museum of American Art purchased and exhibited one of his paintings. This was followed by his first solo exhibition in 1943 at the Charles Barzansky Gallery on Madison Avenue. Gatto’s work at least, had moved uptown.

It has been 65 years since Gatto’s first New York show. The current exhibition at Luise Ross Gallery features a series of his complex utopian visions, alternatives to the gritty world he experienced. Gatto once poignantly said, “I like to paint (outer) space. The material world can hurt you, but in space nobody suffers, and it goes on forever.” Complementing these utopian creations and nature paintings (his inspired jungle oils evoke the spirit of Henri Rousseau with their rich, brooding colors) are rare drawings of brothel scenes, reminiscences from his early years hanging out at a house his elder brother managed. They are touchingly innocent in their simplicity. Gatto’s work is represented in the collections of MOMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, and the Museum of the City of New York.

Title: **Victor Joseph Gatto**
“You can’t paint this
way unless you believe
in what you’re painting”

Dates: **5 January – 9 February 2008**