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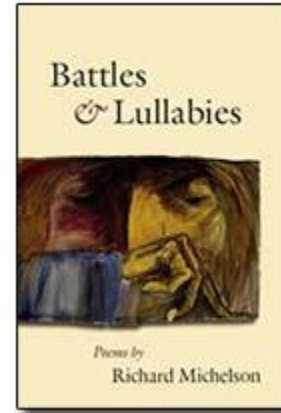
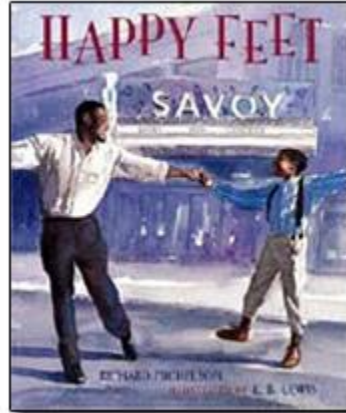
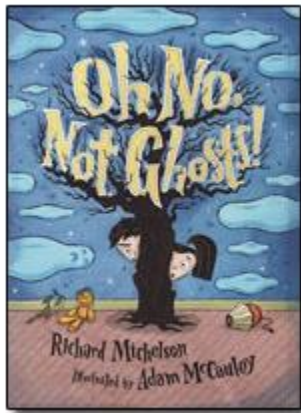
APoet's Eye @ Michelson Gallery

Among Richard Michelson's most recent publications (he's published many volumes) you'll find *Happy Feet*, which has nothing to do with penguins, though Michelson seems fine with any extra attention the animated film brings his book. His *Happy Feet* is about the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, back in the day when the Lindy Hop was new. E.B. Lewis illustrated the volume. It's a visually pleasing evocation of the swing era for kids.

Oh, No Not Ghosts! Is a second version of an earlier work called *Did You Say Ghosts?*, illustrated by Leonard Baskin. The recent one focuses more on the humorous side of Michelson's story. The new one is illustrated by Adam McCauley and is zippy, rhyming read.

Across the Alley is a children's book drawn in part from Michelson's own childhood in a time when African-American and Jewish communities were first living side by side in Brooklyn. It's also illustrated by E.B. Lewis.

Battles and Lullabies is a book of poems from the University of Illinois Press. On the back of the book, you'll find praise from Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht, as well as former UMass professor and local poet Paul Mariani. Inside, you'll find honed poems grounded in the everyday, but snapping with the kind of life poetry often lacks.



A handful of Richard Michelson's many titles

Perhaps it's the bronze sphinx that sits out front, or the imposing edifice, but R. Michelson Galleries seems iconic, as if it's been there a very long time. It hasn't, of course, but it's been there long enough to become an important part of Northampton's Main Street, a monument to the town's embrace of art.

At the helm of the endeavor is Richard Michelson, a man of Lincoln-esque height who's passionate and eloquent about the arts in general and in particular his gallery, where you'll find the works of many a well-known illustrator and artists, including Dr. Seuss, Bary Moser, Randall Deihl and more.

Michelson has plenty to boast of himself, though he's not a boastful kind of guy. It's all there if you look closely in his gallery—Michelson has penned many children's books and won his share of awards for them. Many of the illustrative works that grace the gallery walks were crated for his books. Michelson is also a poet of considerable talent, whose most recent volume of poems, *Battles and Lullabies*, was published by the University of Illinois press, and who has been anthologized and praised in some very heady places.

In the gallery, you'll find a shelf of large art books, and among the volumes you'll see *Masks*, a book of poems by Michelson with astonishing etchings by Leonard Baskin, one of the biggest names at the Gallery, and a man Michelson can claim as something of a mentor.

Michelson didn't exactly start his career in art in such an auspicious manner. "I started selling reproductions from a van," said Michelson in a recent interview. "You know how every year when school starts, there's that guy on the side of the road selling Monet prints for your dorm room? I was that guy."

He traveled the country selling art, and when he decided it was time to sell original art, he basically parked the van and opened a gallery in the Midwest, which was his repo-selling territory. That was the late '70's, and a few years later he came to Northampton. His knowledge

of the art world wasn't the product of training, but of a passion for art and a talent for taking action.

"I recall purchasing my first 'real' piece of art, as a 19-year-old, after my introduction to the work of Leonard Baskin, long before I dreamt of representing his artwork," Michelson recently wrote. "It was a \$60 etching, and I put \$10 down, after which I paid \$5 a month. I have never been more pleased to own a piece of artwork since."

The Michelson gallery has resided in several Main Street locations, one of them, Michelson says, a tiny space in Thornes Marketplace. Michelson concentrated on young artists he thought held promise, and he's been right a good few times. "My first artist in the area was a high school teacher," says Michelson. "His name was Barry Moser."

Now Michelson's gallery is expansive, filling what used to be a bank. "When I think about how much it costs to keep this place open per day, I get scared. It's a long way from where I started," says Michelson.

With the bigger space came bigger recognition, too. "It used to be that people would come up to visit from New York, from the museums, and say things under their breath, like 'It's not bad for a provincial art gallery. It's very New England.' Now they come up and say, 'It's hard to believe there's such a cutting edge gallery so far from New York,'" explains Michelson.

And thanks to Michelson's eye for artists who go on to success, the gallery has become rather a crossroads for artist and writers alike. "Several times, we've had illustrators win the Caldecott [award for illustration] while their work was hinging in the gallery. And one day, we had three Oprah book club writers come in at separate times over the course of a day."

Success isn't the end of the story, though. Michelson is deeply thoughtful about art and how it relates to culture, and raises questions that aren't always easily answered about the role of art and artists. His ambivalence about the high-flown world of art is not, in some ways, surprising.

"Having entered this world in the less than luxurious Brooklyn neighborhood of East New York with an aim, instilled by my parents, to improve my station in life, I have never entertained romantic notions of 'the starving artist,'" Michelson wrote in response to a recent email. "It is true that many great artists have come out of poverty, or worse. ... But art is just as capable of growing within the confines of the middle class, or the wealthy. My job, as I see it, is to attempt to provide an avenue for my artists to live as comfortably as possible by means of their art. That entails building their audience, and creating a demand, which will necessarily drive up prices to some extent. I think that is a good thing, and I make no excuses for it. Yet in my years of running my gallery, I am most proud of how many young collectors have told me they purchased their first work of art at R Michelson Galleries.

Michelson's reach is hardly limited to the local. It was his combination of success as a writer and as a gallery owner that prompted the State Department to invite him to travel to former Eastern Bloc countries and address artists there. Many of them are adjusting to life without the subsidies they had under communist governments, not to mention the extremes of persecution, even imprisonment, some writers there experienced.

It was and is a good time, Michelson says, but something dawned on him during his travels. "I realized that there was an agenda. I came up from a poor upbringing in Brooklyn and saw a world I knew nothing about, and I became a gallery owner, and I became successful in writing, all without government subsidies. In some ways, I became a poster child for the capitalist system," says Michelson. "And it can be hard, given the limitations--some of these appearances are only half an hour or an hour, and it's really half as long because everything is being said twice [once by a translator as well]—to explain the nuances of my political view. It can be hard to explain that I don't, perhaps, support Bush."

When asked if any of his three hats—gallery owner, poet or children's author—is a passion that is greater than the others, Michelson unhesitatingly says poetry is his real love. But about being a poet, too, he feels some discomfort, explaining that his wife's trip to help repair New Orleans seems to him at odds with his own retreat to Arizona to write. "There are people starving, and here I am sitting in my basement writing. In some ways, it's the ultimate egotistical act."

But isn't there some use in employing a talent to inspire action, even if one isn't directly taking that action? "On my best days, I tell myself that," says Michelson.

Michelson's well-thought views may well be what has filled his gallery with high-caliber art. They also explain his desire to make art, and his gallery, accessible and welcoming. It's infectious to see the mix of reverence and enthusiasm with which he turns the pages of an art book. And if you walk in off the street, Michelson doesn't care if you have the cash to spring for a \$30,000 art book or a cheap lithograph, or if you just want to absorb the atmosphere. It's fitting for Northampton, where art is revered, but incomes aren't necessarily high.

As he was posing for a picture or two, I joked, "Look like a children's author."

Michelson exclaimed, "That's just it—I try to look like a children's author and I look like a poet!"

Make no mistake: Michelson is an unusually talented poet. But it must be that slight misfit of Michelson's sometimes darkly humorous writerly talents with his children's book career that draws people to all of his books. When his recent title *Happy Feet*, about the days of the Lindy hop at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, got caught up in the fever of the new penguin movie of the same title, Michelson wrote in *Publisher's Weekly*: "I published an essay titled 'No, I'm Not

Black and I Can't Dance Either,' to answer those critics who felt Jews (like me) should stick to writing stories about Jews, and leave children's tales of African-American history to African-Americans. But it seems nobody has reservations about Jews writing in the voice of penguins."