**Gerald Wartofsky**
***The Song of the Earth***
**Curated by Tony Cox**
**May 20—June 20, 2026**
**52 White St, New York**

James Fuentes is pleased to present Gerald Wartofsky: *The Song of the Earth* in New York, the artist's first solo exhibition in New York. Wartofsky's intimate paintings live within the grand genre of allegorical painting. Continuing a dialogue that reaches back to the Renaissance, he draws on classical music, Kabbalistic and rabbinic writings, biblical stories, poetry, twentieth-century novels, modern dance and choreography, as well as other artworks as material for reinterpretation. *The Song of the Earth* surveys works made across seven decades of the nonagenarian's still-active practice.

Wartofsky was born in 1935 in New York and moved to Washington, D.C. at the age of five. The son of Jewish immigrants who escaped pogroms, he was deeply affected by an early awareness of the Holocaust as it unfolded during his childhood. Stories of his parents' suffering formed a crucial part of the artist's intense imaginative landscape. During this time, regular visits to the National Gallery and Metropolitan Museum presented Wartofsky with what he would later describe as an "extended family" of artists. There he encountered a wide range of historical paintings, whose profound moral, philosophical, and emotional narratives set the terms for his own approach to painting and allegory.

This exhibition is titled after one of Wartofsky's most significant paintings, *On Gustav Mahler: The Song of the Earth* (1970–75). The work encapsulates the artist's core concerns: painting as part of an ongoing chain of cultural transmission, and the question of how individuals and their stories persist, or fail to persist within the vast and continuous life of the world. *The Song of the Earth* takes Mahler's song-symphony *Das Lied von der Erde* (1908–09) as both namesake and conceptual score. Composed in the wake of a series of personal tragedies, the Austrian Jewish composer's work adapts poems from Hans Bethge's *Die chinesische Flöte* (1907)—itself derived from German interpretations of classical Chinese verse—into a meditation on transience, nature, longing, and farewell. Wartofsky's painting reimagines these themes in visual terms.

In *On Curzio Malaparte's 'La Pelle': Holocaust* (1976–78), Wartofsky turns to wartime scenes portrayed in Malaparte's surreal, semi-autobiographical 1949 novel *La Pelle (The Skin)*. Set in Allied-occupied Naples in 1943, the book offers a grotesque account of a city "liberated" into starvation and moral rot. Wartofsky's image is steeped in hues of rust, flesh, and shadowy greens, describing innumerable lifeless figures hanging from trees and slumped on the ground. The painting interprets a scene in which the novel's narrator is drawn by a strong wind into a forest and discovers men strung from the trees, many of them Jews. Approaching the most abstract of Wartofsky's paintings, it is at the same time one of the most emotionally graphic. The painter explicitly connects this work to Renaissance depictions of the *Massacre of the Innocents*, placing its twentieth-century war imagery in direct dialogue with the iconography that once pictured biblical violence.

Despite such close relationships to his source materials, Wartofsky never simply pictures their scenes. His oeuvre can be understood within a long history of artists who treat the surface of the painting itself as a site of abstraction within narrative—from Caravaggio to Rembrandt to twentieth-century expressionism. While his paintings are full of recognizable forms, their contents continually push toward abstraction in the way they are rendered and related to one another. At the level of motif, Wartofsky's recurring dolls, dead birds, and dried flowers become abstractions of the human figure and of death itself, even as they operate as metaphorical anchors within his scenes. At all levels, Wartofsky uses figuration as a vehicle for complex, non-visual content.

As well as the enduring influence of the artists Wartofsky describes as "aunts, uncles, and grandparents"—Rembrandt, Goya, Kokoschka, Van Gogh, Soutine, Carpaccio, and many others—his late wife, Karin, remains a profound presence and inspiration in his work. A celebrated choreographer, teacher, and child-centered dance therapist, she performed at major venues including the Kennedy Center, Lisner Auditorium, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, framing her life story through dance. Wartofsky's *Karin's Garden* series is rooted in their backyard garden visible from his studio, which she made central to her own creative life. The series traces a temporal and emotional transition, encompassing works made before and during the progression of Karin's Alzheimer's, and after her passing in 2011. The works foreground his long-standing fascination with hands—expressive, independent protagonists that bear the imprint of her choreographic understanding of gesture and seem to reach through the veil between worlds.

The garden imagery is distilled further in Wartofsky's *Evocation of the Letter Shin* paintings, as disembodied hands and protea flowers hover like isolated fragments from Karin's Garden. Found at the center of these

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works, the Hebrew letter Shin (ש), bound to the divine name *El Shaddai*, signifies the "eternal flame"—an energy at once purifying, destructive, and powerfully creative. The protea itself is a terrestrial symbol of survival through fire and hard-won transformation, while in Greek mythology the sea god Proteus could change shape at will. Modeled on Karin's hands, these images speak to the deeply personal nature of divine inspiration, quietly threading back to the artist's broader meditations on mortality, revelation, and the passage between earthly and otherworldly realms. Today, Wartofsky describes their garden as a spiritual, natural extension of The Song of the Earth—a living ground to which he continually returns.

## Artist Bio

Gerald Wartofsky (born 1935 in Brooklyn, NY; lives and works in Washington, D.C.) studied at American University and at the Art Students League of New York with George Grosz in the early 1950s; following by a time working in Florence, where immersion in the Renaissance masters, including Piero della Francesca and Paolo Uccello, shaped his commitment to structural complexity and allegorical depth. He was included in the seminal 1988 exhibition, *Golem! Danger, Deliverance and Art* at The Jewish Museum in New York. Wartofsky has been the subject of multiple solo exhibitions in Washington, D.C. at B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, American University Art Gallery, Georgetown University Art Gallery, and the Washington Studio School. Group exhibition venues include Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Club Rhubarb, and CANADA in New York, and Meat Market Gallery in Washington, D.C. Between 1961 and 2011, Wartofsky taught art at many academies including the Corcoran School of Art, University of Virginia, Smithsonian Institution, American University, George Washington University, and Georgetown University, among others; as well as leading his own school, Wartofsky Studio Workshop, from 1990 to 2013.

Gerald Wartofsky: *The Song of the Earth* is staged in collaboration with Tony Cox of Club Rhubarb and Isabella St. Ivany.

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