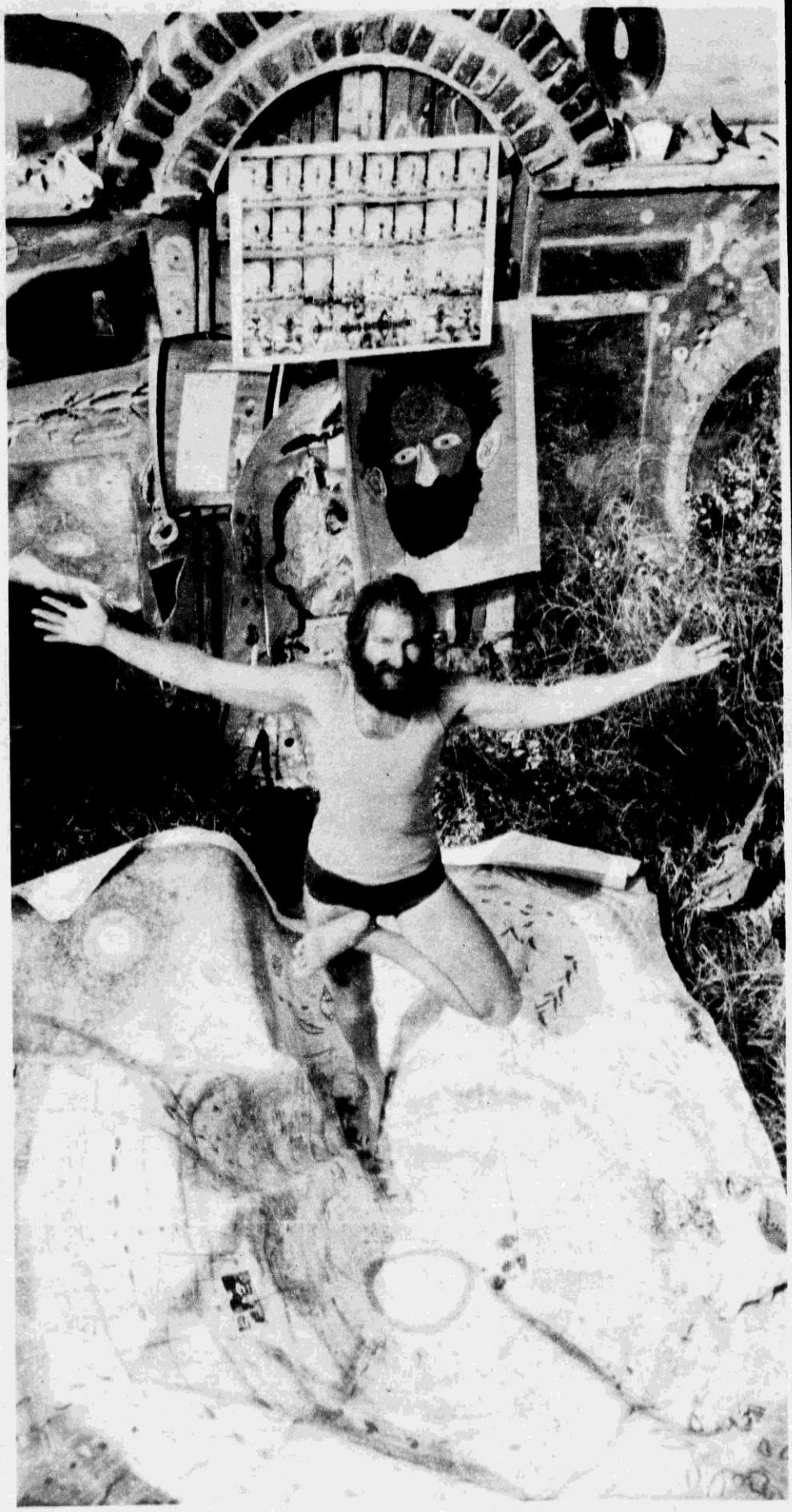
Photographs by Michael Viola

Isaiah's studio bathroom is a place that both reflects and inspires creativity. Even brushing your teeth, he says, is art.

Mirrors are a big part of Isaiah's art. "They fool me every time," he says, "because they take in everything else."



Anything Isaiah Does Is Art

From the time he begins brushing his teeth in the morning, Isaiah Zagar sees himself as a creative force at the "center of the center" of the art world.

Waving two of his weavings in the back yard of his studio, Isaiah wears the ceremonial poncho that a friend made for his 41st birthday. The poncho incorporates many colorful objects contributed by Isaiah.

ABOVE: Isaiah's wife, Julia, peers from the window of the couple's artfully fashioned dwelling on South Street. LEFT: "Philadelphia is the center of the art world," Isaiah has said.

By MARYANNE CONHEIM

On this very date exactly one year ago, at about 4:45 p.m., at the plaza of the Municipal Services Building, at the foot of Jacques Lipschitz's landmark sculpture *Government of the People*, about a hundred souls, fantastically garbed and wearing theatrical makeup, cavorted like nymphs and satyrs celebrating the rites of spring. Some were clinking finger cymbals, others were shaking tambourines and still others were playing bongos. The crowd included at least one stilt-walker, several marionettes and a few "high priests" clad in flowing silks who were carrying poles draped with banners and weavings.

Eventually, in mummer fashion, the crowd made its way up Broad Street to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Leading the procession was an exuberant fellow with a bushy beard and a beatific smile who wore a yellow poncho over his brown, crushed-velvet tunic. At the Academy, the group spilled into the Morris Gallery, which had been transformed into a kaleidoscope of reds and greens by an eye-popping assemblage of mirrors, fabrics, pyramids, icons and all sorts of primitive-looking objects of wood, glass and ceramic. Covering nearly every square inch of wall space were drawings, paintings, photographs and banners — no two alike, but each unmistakably the visage of the beatific bearded man.

Electronic music woofed and tweeted, and the beatific bearded man stepped onto a large altar and began meditating, perched stork-like on his right leg. Soon, he was joined by several other performers, including a man in a gold mask, lavender chiffon gown and rose-petal belt. The beatific bearded man and his friends then proceeded to "dispense art to the public" with the help of such props as a white tree branch, a rabbit hand puppet and a toy mouse.

The reactions of those who witnessed this performance ranged from delight to disgust. To at least a few observers, it appeared to be a puerile put-on, an exercise in narcissistic self-indulgence, a fatuous flame-out by a leftover hippie. Some bystanders even interpreted the event as an attempt by the beatific bearded man to become a cult figure. One actually likened him to the Rev. Jim Jones, the cult leader who inspired the Jonestown massacre.

But to those who knew the beatific bearded man and his art, the happening was quintessential Isaiah Zagar. Those who criticized the event as silly and meaningless "entirely missed the point of the procession and the altar," says Frank Goodyear Jr., the Academy's curator and a man who considers Isaiah's work "almost magical." "It represented his willingness to share and let other people be part of his work. Isaiah wants his work to be a part of life, as opposed to something distant. In that sense, I would call his work populistic."

Isaiah's work has been called a lot of things, and so has he. Some regard him as a shabbily garbed prophet, one of the most creative and imaginative influences on the art scene today. Others of a more cynical bent view Isaiah as a clever self-promoter, an ad man, an entrepreneur, an incurable exhibitionist. Anne d'Harnoncourt, curator of 20th century art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, calls Isaiah a far-reaching visionary whose self-portraits have a cumulative power: "Two are more than one, three are more than two and three hundred are simply amazing," she says. (The museum purchased two last year.)

In Isaiah's work, a number of major art trends of the past decade seem to coalesce: performance, neo-primitivism, autobiography, but especially an impulse to return so-called "high art" to the realm of everyday life. Despite Isaiah's attempts to bring art to the people and the amazing proliferation of his work, however, until this year — when the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) awarded him a $10,000 grant — Isaiah Zagar was virtually unknown outside of Philadelphia. In fact, he was well-known only on South Street, where he and his wife, Julia, have been catalysts of the local art community for years. The Zagars own the Eyes Gallery at Fourth and South and live in an artfully fashioned dwelling above it.

Now, though, there are signs that that is all changing, and that Isaiah, at 41, is on the verge of receiving the official critical acclaim he has long deserved. Last month, after years of hungering for such recognition, he was formally anointed by the impeccably credentialed Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) of the University of Pennsylvania, long at the forefront of national art trends. His work will appear in a show, "Projects: Made in Philadelphia 4," which opens there next month. And, for the first time, he was not only invited to display his art at the prestigious Cheltenham Art Show now on display at the Civic Center, but he was also awarded a first prize for sculpture. The award was remarkable because until last year his work had been repeatedly spurned by the eminent Cheltenham jury. A one-man show of Isaiah's work opened last week at the Alfred O. Deshong Museum of Widener University, and plans for a future show at the Philadelphia artists' cooperative, Nexus, are under way. Although Isaiah has been around Philadelphia for

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more years than has Nexus, he was invited to join only last May. "It takes longer for artists with unique visions to become recognized," says ICA director Janet Kardon by way of explanation. "For artists whose work is more easily categorized, the path is definitely easier in terms of recognition."

If Isaiah is finally becoming known, it is not entirely by accident. In fact, those who consider him a clever self-promoter and a shrewd entrepreneur may not be completely wrong. Since last spring, Isaiah has been taking out ads in an influential New York art guide. Will his efforts to publicize himself and the Philadelphia art scene pay off? It's too early to tell, but if they do, it will help not only Isaiah, but also all the other artists living and working here.

Anyone who has seen Isaiah Zagar's work has seen Isaiah Zagar, for Isaiah does self-portraits, hundreds — no, *thousands* of self-portraits. All of them are the image of Isaiah, and yet all of them are somehow different. "Yeah, all of the objects have me in them, but what is me?" asks Isaiah. "Is this one me?" he says, pointing to a portrait on his living room wall made primarily of pulverized orange peels. "Is this one?" In the second one, the "me" is rapidly disappearing behind a ferociously whimsical beard of work gloves. In a third, the "me" seems to be imploding into a black hole of darkly sparkling granules. "My particular 'self' is one that is already gone," explains Isaiah. "The visage in the mirror has already disappeared. It changes from moment to moment."

Isaiah's self-portraits have the intensely primitive, devotional quality of Spanish icons, and they make some people intensely uncomfortable. It's not the portraits themselves that bother people — wherein Isaiah sometimes appears more resplendent than an Oriental potentate and sometimes in the guise of a fugitive rainbow — but the fact that they are, to say the least, legion.

> "Whenever I draw myself, I am elated," says Isaiah. "My whole stance in making art is joy."

"Egotistical," some people whisper knowingly in the galleries where the Isaiahs are shown. One viewer of an Isaiah exhibit termed it the "Me Generation's Hall of Fame."

Is Isaiah guilty of self-absorption, the crime of the 1970s? "I'm very, very lucky that I've found a key to expression that's so close to home," says Isaiah, explaining his affinity for mirrors. "It took years of hiding behind things and drawing people on subways. I finally realized, if I can know something about them, I can know something about myself. I don't have any preconceptions about what people should or shouldn't look like. I used to paint Julia. I made her nose too big, her chin too long, her hair out of place. . . . She was never happy.

"There was this socially prominent woman, Bea Edwards (not her real name). She said, 'Isaiah, dawling! I want you to do a portrait of me.' I told her I didn't do society portraits, but she insisted, so I worked and worked on it. It was supposed to be a surprise gift for her husband. When he saw it, he was appalled. *Appalled.* She now believes it's 'unworthy of me,' and it's in her closet. So you ask, Why do I do myself? Because whenever I draw myself, I am elated. My whole stance in making art is joy. It's always a revelation — my nose, my eyes, my hair, my ears — because the harder and deeper you look for yourself, you're not there."

Actually, Isaiah does more than self-portraits. His autobiographical *oeuvre* includes photo collages of his family and friends, and he has done literally hundreds of drawings of Abie Kravitz, an octogenarian South Street fruit vendor who died in 1976. The series began when Isaiah invited Abie to a showing of his self-portraits. "Vell, it's nice, but there's none of me," Abie observed. So Isaiah drew Abie — in revolutionary frock coat, as a figure in a Chinese painting, as a heart and even as a flower. "I was born to paint Abie the fruit man," Isaiah scrawled ecstatically on one of the drawings. "When Abie died, I painted his stand black, spray-painted '1894 to 1976' and sat a vigil," Isaiah says. ". . . He became an angel very soon after." Even today, four years later, Isaiah still draws Abie when the spirit moves him.

Isaiah's home above his gallery on South Street is itself a work of art, encrusted with mosaics of crushed tile and mirror that stream up to the skylight above his bed and into the Zagars' roof garden. Also affixed in the plaster are found objects — hand-carved plastic animals, plastic flowers, tea sets and mementoes of the Zagars' colorful journey through life. (In addition to the Eyes Gallery, the Zagars own a commercial property around the corner, a studio on 10th Street and a farm where they summer in Clover Lick, W. Va. They also make an annual pilgrimage to Mexico, where Julia finds and develops crafts for the gallery.) "I live my art. Everything I do is art. Everything I make is art," says Isaiah. "And I'm always joyous, because it's far beyond what I could have imagined."

Perhaps the most controversial expressions of Isaiah's art are his performances, which have rankled even his own family. Julia has vowed never to attend one again, and some — though by no means all — of Isaiah's friends construe such "art events" as nothing more than exhibitionism. "The performance aspect of my art is very straining on Julia, because it makes me vulnerable. She's frightened of it," Isaiah says. "But for me, it's more interesting than anything else. It's a momentary chance to see the human process at work. Thought processes become very visible in situations like that."

For confirmation, just ask Isaiah's son, Zeke. Zeke, who is now 11 and generally very understanding of *la vie boheme*, once almost disowned Isaiah for an art performance in which Isaiah shaved his head. Isaiah did so because he was seeking the answer to a Zen master's riddle: What did your face look like before you were born? "It was an art-historical event that nobody understood," Isaiah says sadly. "It was a trauma for Zeke. All of a sudden, I wasn't who he thought I was. I had to send everyone away and talk to him,

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calm him down. He was upset for hours, and even after we'd talked, he kept moaning, 'What's everyone gonna *say*? What're they gonna *think*?' Finally, I told him, 'Tell them your father is an artist and that it was a performance. And tell them . . . that in six months it'll grow back.' "

Where, you may be wondering by now, did such a person as Isaiah Zagar come from? The first of three children, Isaiah was born and grew up in Brooklyn. Back then, his first name was Irwin. "When you're a Jew growing up in Brooklyn, they don't name you Isaiah," he explains. "They name you Ira, or Irving or Irwin." His father was an electrical engineer who worked in automation, and his mother ran a paint store. Although neither parent is an artist, says Zagar, "my mother has a fantastic sense of color. When she dresses my father and they go walking down the street, they are a moving sculpture." Isaiah went to a number of schools, but didn't attend many classes. In fifth grade, for example, he spent most of the school year rambling along the streams and estuaries of Brooklyn's Marine Park. "I had a teacher who was very understanding. He told me, 'Isaiah, you don't *have* to come in.' I passed with a 'C' average," he says. Later, as a student at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute of Art, Isaiah dispensed with classes by his junior year. "I used to spend whole days in the subway, drawing. That was what I needed," he said. "I developed a kind of furtive style where I never had to look down."

His artistic ability manifested itself at an early age. "They figured out right away that I wasn't going to be good at anything else," he says of his parents. Isaiah's mother came home one day and found little Irwin decorating the house with crayons — the walls, floors, ceilings, everything. "I was doing it up royally," he says. "I got beaten royally, too." Isaiah has a theory about that traumatic episode. "Most artists are very anxiety-prone about their work," he says. "I've often thought that this is one of the keys (to creativity)."

At Pratt, Isaiah says he was taught that art was "Rembrandt, Cezanne, Van Gogh. . . . They were sure this was art." Young Irwin Zagar disagreed. "(To them) art had to do with stretching your canvas," he says. "I had such a ritual about stretching my canvas. And *genu-ine* oil paint. You take the tube, you open it, you sniff it — it's almost a sexual thing for the artist. He's driven nuts by it."

After college, Isaiah went to live in a monastery in Latrobe, Pa. The monks gave him room and board plus $15 a month in exchange for a series of etchings on the visions of Jeremiah. After a year of the contemplative life, Isaiah moved to the lower East Side of New York, where he supported himself by writing letters to friends asking that they send him $100 a month. "I was living on cracked eggs," he says. "By the time I was really getting tired of cracked eggs, I met Julia (then an art student)." Irwin and Julia were married in May 1963. In September, they joined the Peace Corps, serving as craft developers in Peru for three years. After traveling for a while, the Zagars eventually ended up in Philadelphia because Isaiah's sister was studying art at Tyler School of Art and "because our priority was to be close to New York but not in New York."

It was while Irwin and Julia were in Peru with the Peace Corps that Zagar became Isaiah. The Peruvian gourd carvers whose work they were developing were having such a tough time pronouncing "Irwin" that Isaiah decided that the time had come to give himself a new name. When Isaiah returned from Peru with his mellifluous Biblical name, though, his family was horrified. "You're Irwin," they told him unequivocally. Eventually, however, one by one, the relatives gave in — except for Isaiah's Uncle Cecil. "One time he followed me all the way down the street yelling, 'Irwin, Irwin!' I ignored him and kept walking until I came into the house and closed the door. Finally, he knocked on the door, and I said to him, 'Uncle Cecil, my name is Isaiah.' I offered him a cup of tea. . . . Then I saw that my uncle had tears streaming down his face. I gave in and I cried with him. Because he'd been through so much, I said, 'Uncle Cecil, you can call me Irwin.'. . . After that, he was able to call me Isaiah." In a way, Isaiah continues, "my uncle is a symbol of all of us. Even the smallest changes are practically impossible."

Twice in this century, the art world has been caught up in a revival of primitive art. As early as 1906, Picasso made use of its strong, simple forms, and his modernist followers found in it the means of expressing powerful, unconscious drives. In the late '70s, another group of artists — mostly living in the eastern United States — succumbed to its spell, using such materials as branches, bone, bark and beads to mimic the mythic quality of authentic ritual objects. Isaiah Zagar is part of the new wave of neo-primitivism, but with a difference — it matters to him that primitive art draws its power as much from magic and complex ritual as from form. "Most art objects do not pass through a living life. . . . Mine do," he says. "My procession poles were not made for a museum. They were made for an actual festival on South Street. I am not coming from a place of just form. My whole work is that I am a shaman of my time."

> "I look at the things and I am amazed," says Isaiah. "I can't remember making them."

Isaiah believes that art schools, museums and even art-supply stores have conspired to intimidate artists into using only traditional materials, thereby ascribing greater importance to them than to the artist's imagination. "It's a trick," he says, using a favorite word. "The work is much more important than the materials. People say, 'I do oils. I do pen and ink.' No! That's just the materials!"

Today, Isaiah uses whatever materials are close at hand — orange peels, coffee grounds and even rubber stamps (he makes his own; one says "Glorious Revelation Certified"). "I have no idea what's next," he says. "It's always changing, and I go along with that change. There are thousands of shards of mirror that I have put into my work. They are forms. I have to understand the shapes, but they fool me every time, because they take in everything else. So form isn't the whole thing at all! . . . My teachers tricked me, 'cause they were tricked themselves. . . . Maybe someday, they said, we would make 'great' art. Not this time, but maybe next time. 'You will fail,' they said, 'because you cannot live up to the history of art.' They don't realize that when they brush their teeth, it's art."

Isaiah's friends frequently disparage him by saying, "Isaiah, you *always* like what you do." To which Isaiah responds by asking, "Why would they say that in a derogatory way? It must be that they have trouble liking themselves and what *they* do." "But, Isaiah," his friends persist, "don't you have favorites among your creations?" Isaiah is exasperated but feigns patience. "Look," he says, "sometimes I am such a powerful conductor that I am not even aware of having done anything. I look at the things and I am amazed. I can't remember making them. Did I make them, or did someone else make them?"

On occasion, the answer is that someone else *did* make them. Isaiah delights in pressing his friends into the service of his art, sometimes giving them materials and, at other times, ideas. He often incorporates the hybrid results into his own work. Last March, for his 41st birthday celebration, for example, Isaiah asked a friend, Susan Lunenfeld, to make him a ceremonial robe. Ms. Lunenfeld, a fashion designer who works primarily in fragile antique lace, was at first taken aback by the request. "I couldn't imagine how I could relate my lace to a man in a way that would be masculine enough that it wouldn't be ridiculous," she says. "I said I didn't think I could do it."

Earlier, Isaiah had visited Ms. Lunenfeld's shop, By Susan, and purchased bits of lace to incorporate into his collages. This time, however, he also planted the seed of an idea. "A month later, I was buying some material, and I came across a huge, crocheted spread," Ms. Lunenfeld recalls. "I didn't buy it, but later that night I was suddenly struck with the idea that if I had, I could have made something for Isaiah. After it settled in my mind, I knew I could transform the spread into a poncho, which would be comfortable on him and look like him." (A Peruvian wool poncho is Isaiah's winter uniform.)

And so, the next day, Ms. Lunenfeld raced back to the upper Northeast and purchased the spread. Isaiah was overjoyed and brought her some of his own things to incorporate into the robe. His contributions included colorful Peruvian gloves, embroidered "Isaiah" faces and handwoven ribbons from South America. "I was really upset," Ms. Lunenfeld recalls. "I said I couldn't use those faces and gloves; it would ruin my work." Isaiah told her not to worry, that it wouldn't matter whether or not she used them. Freed of any obligation, however, Ms. Lunenfeld suddenly began to see ways of using Isaiah's objects. "I said to myself, 'Be free, be creative,' " she says. "Even though I had fought it at first, I decided to let go of my rigid idea of what (the robe) should be . . . and it sprang forth." The result — a garment that personifies both Susan's meticulous fashion sense and Isaiah's primitive power — delighted both of them. "It became something other than what I thought it would be," says Ms. Lunenfeld, "but in the end, I loved it."

Lately, Isaiah has become obsessed with the idea of spreading his influence beyond Philadelphia. "I realized in 1976 that I needed to somehow move my ideas and being out of South Street. I'd become a South Street figure," he says. "I need to get into the mainstream of world art, so my work won't glut me, choke me. I make objects voluminously, but I've got to find a way to get them out. What I've been struggling with for the past months is how to find the mainstream so I can plug into it."

Not surprisingly, Isaiah found his answer in the mirror. "Philadelphia is the center of the art world," he announced last spring to Julia and friends. "And I am the center of the center." Having proclaimed this truth, the next problem was how to get the word out. New York, also the self-styled center of the art world, has a small but influential monthly publication, Art Now Gallery Guide. The guide lists Manhattan galleries by neighborhood and even provides maps for the dedicated gallery-goer. Some shows are singled out for photographs while others are honored by a full-page artist's "profile." The guide makes it clear that the center of the art world lies somewhere between 57th Street and Soho.

To Isaiah, the solution seemed simple: Convince the guide's editors to include a section on Philadelphia — and, not incidentally — on Isaiah Zagar as well. "You know what I found out?" Isaiah says, dumbfounded. "Everything in the magazine is a paid ad! A gallery listing is $40. A picture is $50. A full-page 'profile' is $350." And so, last March, Isaiah bought a listing for the Eric Makler Gallery, where his work was then being shown, plus a full-page picture, which he paid for with his NEA grant money. "They accepted it!" he exclaims. "Don't you think they'd have an editorial staff, someone who would say, 'Who is this Isaiah Zagar?' "

After the ad ran, Isaiah got a call from an old friend of his in New York. He said, 'Isaiah, you're getting famous. I saw you in the Gallery Guide.' " Then, in the April issue, a slim banner on the cover proclaimed, "Introducing Philadelphia." Inside was a section on Philadelphia with 4½ pages of photographs and listings, including the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Institute of Contemporary Art. Some of the Philadelphia museums and galleries actually purchased ads, and in some cases where galleries pleaded poverty Isaiah used his NEA grant money to buy ads in their names. (The NEA doesn't mind: A grant can be used for anything the artist thinks will help his career, and it would undeniably help Isaiah's career if Philadelphia became the center of the art world.) Although Philadelphia's two most venerable dealers in contemporary art, Hope Makler and Marian Locks, at first hung back, they eventually climbed on Isaiah's bandwagon and took out ads in the Gallery Guide. "They were wondering, 'Is he going to be the idiot child or the genius?' " Isaiah says, by way of explaining their initial reluctance.

As a result of the new communications link he has forged with New York, Isaiah now believes that the art and artists of Philadelphia are soon to be accorded national recognition. And, he says, "I want it to be on the record how it happened." Could it be, Isaiah, that Philadelphia will wake up one morning, look in the mirror and see itself as the center of the art world? "I think we're ready," Isaiah says. "The major thing that I do is to turn reality into dream, and dream into reality. In other words, I'm a realist."