

THE EXPRESSIVE VOICE: SELECTIONS FROM THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

Danforth Museum of Art
123 Union Avenue
Framingham, Massachusetts

Through February 26

In the suburban margins of Boston, a modest museum sits patiently, its yellow brick façade betraying no hint of the legacy housed within its unique permanent collection. This is the Danforth Museum — and the secret is out.



Hyman Bloom, *Seascape II*, 1974, oil on canvas, 55" x 72".

Thanks to the persistence of museum director Katherine French, the Danforth is recognized as the go-to institution for the exhibition, housing and exploration of artworks related to Boston Expressionism, a sprawling movement itself thriving in the margins of 20th century American art history.

Preceding and informing the success of its better-known nemesis, Abstract Expressionism, the Boston school grew out of a deep respect for the work of Oskar Kokoschka (whose 1914 lithograph "Oskar Kokoschka" is currently on view), Max Beckmann and other Expressionist painters caught up in Europe's perilous

political landscape. Karl Zerbe, a German refugee painter who brought European Expressionism to Boston, hit a nerve with his protégées at The Museum School, many of them immigrants of the Jewish Baltic diaspora struggling to contextualize their secular identities in a modern America.

Coming into their own between the Great Depression and the start of World War II, long-lived Boston painters Hyman Bloom (1913-2009) and Jack Levine (1915-2010) led the movement's first wave. Working primarily from memory, the visionary interests of their circle found voice in narrative scenes stemming from sources as varied (and at times, incendiary) as the New Testament, the Talmud, the morgue, the slaughterhouse and the foibles of the political arena.

Young and prolific, they made a splash. According to painter Bernard Chaet, when first confronted with Bloom's ferocious paintings of chandeliers and Christmas trees at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1942, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock declared him the first Abstract Expressionist. Ironically, as the New York School won worldwide attention, the visionary painters of Boston were pushed out of the spotlight and into the margins.

"The expressive qualities in art are one of the reasons that Abstract Expressionism really happened" notes French, who upon her arrival

at the Danforth in 2005 recognized an opportunity to differentiate the museum from its peers — instead of showcasing “that [ubiquitous] Picasso print,” she honed in on the regional story inherent in their collection.

To be fair, the attempt to draw a tidy frame around a movement that sprawls over seven decades is a fool’s errand — a goal equally unattainable through a 900-word article or a single exhibit. To this end, French championed a series of exhibits designed to highlight, compare and contrast the careers of the Boston School’s founding fathers, including “Jack Levine: Political Discourse” and the traveling exhibition “Hyman Bloom: A Spiritual Embrace” (which broke an invisible, yet tenacious regional barrier to appear at New York’s Yeshiva University Museum shortly after the painter’s death in 2009); second- and third-generation Boston Expressionists

Arthur Polonsky, Jason Berger, David Aronson, Gerry Bergstein and others.

In this latest, organic survey of over 100 artworks, we find an earnest attempt to expand on and re-contextualize now-familiar gems of the collection. Henry Schwartz’s obsessively detailed mixed-media collage “Pierrot Lunaire” finds its sad-eyed Schoenberg keeping loose company with other portrait-themed works in the entrance hallway.

French, along with associate curator Jessica Roscio, also scratches a longtime itch to provide context for paintings, drawings and photographs by the collection’s many female counterparts. A short list includes Renee Rothbein, Kristina Eagan Mast, Katherine Porter, Jane Smaldone, Nina Bohlen (Hyman Bloom’s first wife), Joan Snyder and Pat Steir. “It is part of the [Danforth’s] mission to tell the complete story of Boston Expressionism,” noted French.



Renee Rothbein, *Garden (Inflorescence)*, 1969, oil on canvas, 54" x 67".

A lush duo of botanicals by Renee Rothbein holds court near the exhibit entrance. Rendered in a joyfully violent, psycho-chrome impasto, Rothbein’s feminine, flowery subject matter in “Garden (Inflorescence)” takes on a bricklayer’s alter ego. Step up close and watch pretty blooms dissolve into a surface as thickly caked as a painter’s palette.

“The Expressive Voice” also highlights new acquisitions by Hyman Bloom, David Aronson, Karl Zerbe and a superb, bristling portrait of Philip Guston by Jon Imber, a protégée of Guston’s tenure at Boston University.

The main gallery showcases Hyman Bloom’s “Seascape II” — an explosion of frenzied, cannibalistic fish carcasses rendered in frenetic swaths of red and blue that evoke the hues of old school 3-D glasses. Through this coloration and an optical trick of the gallery’s slightly curved wall, the scene appears to pop out at the viewer — a barely contained mass of gaping jaws, flailing fins and razor sharp bone. Freshly acquired in November, the painting is both ghastly and beautiful. When queried by the young daughter of a friend

on the grisly subject matter, Bloom stated simply: “Big fish eat little fish.” Indeed.

French’s big push has led to accelerated interest in the Danforth and its collection. As the estates of mid-century collectors are settled or downsized as retirees move on, donors are now contacting the museum in earnest, looking for good homes for their family treasures. This has made for some hair-raising, quick-turnaround bequeaths. A set of whimsical bronzes by David Aronson were offered within days of this exhibit opening with the stipulation



Jon Imber, *Portrait of Phillip Guston in a Green Coat*, 1982, oil on canvas, 66" x 54".



Henry Schwartz, *Pierrot Lunaire*, 1991, oil and mixed media paper collage on canvas, 19" x 15".



Karl Zerbe, *Under the Chandelier*, 1948, gouache, 20" x 26".

that handlers "come and get it now!" or lose them to the auction block. While not the finest examples of work by the political satirist, best represented by glowing encaustic and trompe l'oeil brushwork, their immediate inclusion in this exhibit speaks to the fleet-footedness of the institution.

"What is exciting is that many of these new acquisitions have never been exhibited at an institution before," noted French. "They were the gems of private collections. But the Danforth is offering a home for Boston Expressionism. It is part of the story we are telling."

Meredith Cutler



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