

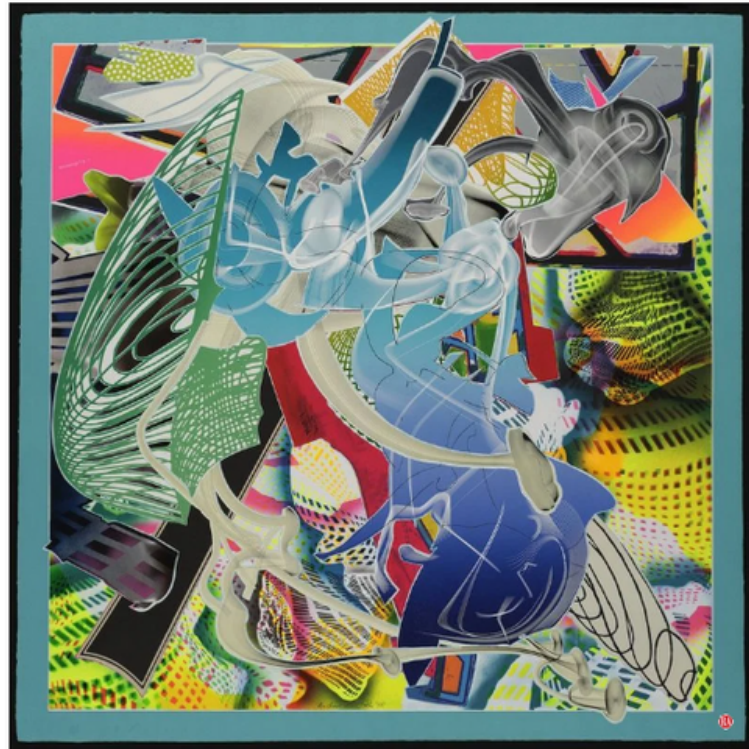




New Britain art: American post-war history offers controversy, creative brilliance

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN June 10, 2023  33  1



'Cantahar from Imaginary Places III' (1998) by Frank Stella (New Britain Museum of American Art)

In August of 1949, Rep. George A. Dondero of Michigan stood in front of the speaker of the House of Representatives and declaimed modern art as a weapon of Communism.

It was depraved, disordered, deranged, a propagandistic contrivance of the Marxist state to sully and manipulate the purehearted, clear-eyed American.

And besides, nobody could understand it.

"The question is, what have we, the plain American people, done to deserve this sore affliction that has been visited upon us so direly; who has brought down this curse upon us; who has let into our homeland this horde of germ-carrying art vermin?"

Whoever it was, it put America on the artistic map.

In the period just after World War II, Modern Art, Abstract Expressionism and other movements that followed would snatch the artistic spotlight away from Paris and settle it right on the U.S. That did not mean it didn't – and still doesn't – have plenty of detractors, folks like Dondero, who continually castigated modern art as being "distorted and ugly" a style that did not "glorify our beautiful country, our cheerful and smiling people and our material progress."

Of course, the point was that then, as now, not everybody was so chipper. In the aftermath of the atom bomb, the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the reexamination of the self, spawned by Freud and Jung, plenty of people felt unhinged, unmoored and uncertain – a bit like the country today.

“From the Vault: Post-War to Contemporary Art,” now at New Britain Museum of American Art, charts that history with about 100 paintings from its collection. For those looking to understand how art reflects and alters the culture, this tidy, guileless exhibit is as good a place to start as any.

Although the exhibit features American superstars like Robert Motherwell, Frank Stella, Cleve Gray, Andy Warhol, Jim Dine and Anni and Josef Albers, it is limited by the museum’s own holdings. So you won’t see superstars like Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, Franz Klein or Jackson Pollock, significant forces in this trajectory. But it reminds viewers how robust a collection New Britain possesses and how even a medium-size museum can tell a great big story with a few sparkling gems and some real dazzlers.



'September, West 74th' by Stone Roberts (New Britain Museum of American Art)

“From the Vault” begins with Abstract Expressionism, which was in art what jazz was to music – free, improvisational, imaginative – and utterly American. It was also not to everyone’s taste. For artists like Cleve Gray, two of whose wondrous works are on display, it allowed a language of self-expression that could be felt by others – if only by its violent, adamant brushstrokes and soothing ponds of color. In works like “Reconciliation” and “Tearing the Sky Out of Night,” Gray shreds any pretense of representation. Here is turmoil, confusion, contrition and recalibration in one black knot of anguish, resolved in a soothing mauve of symmetry.

Carl Jung’s idea that the self is a reservoir of antecedents – cultural and psychological – helped artists like Adolph Gottlieb in his “Omen for a Hunter,” William Baziotis in “Dusk” or Theodoros Stamos in his “Cathedral” articulate an inner life that was individual and collective. That idea – that the collective unconscious unifies us just as coherently as our DNA – was a balm for artists wracked by the possibility of nuclear annihilation and confused by a culture that valorized consumerism as a form of patriotism.

Faced with such existential risks, artists looked inward, a reflex that would be repeated in the 21st century when identity substituted expression as the artist’s dominant concern.

The problem for Abstract Expressionism was it reached a point of self-satire. Without the hidebound conventions that had confined art for centuries, expression could be a little too arcane, overly self-absorbed and utterly inscrutable. With the arrival of German-born Josef Albers to the United States, a more analytical, reductive form of abstraction emerged.

His work, well represented here in "Homage to the Square," flattened and reduced landscape to its most elemental. Here are colored squares superimposed on one another, in a mathematically calibrated way so that each of the forms relates to the other. It was this sort of work that clearly inspired the conceptual artist Sol LeWitt, who is represented here by an earlier work, his violently theatrical "Seascape." Still, in a world where concepts like Albers' swarm on our computer screen unbidden, his work can seem distant and sterile.

Those who dismiss "modern" or "contemporary" art as an impenetrable mess have sadly missed some of the more recent, underappreciated shifts toward a realism. This is not the heroic realism of the Hudson River School but a crystalline, narratively ambiguous photorealism that even the Donderos of the world would be hard-pressed to dismiss.

Stone Roberts' "September, West 74th," with its limpid precision and meticulous, glassy exactitude, reads like an homage to Dutch Masters, as narrated by John Cheever. Here are a woman and man in their Manhattan apartment, apparently preparing for a party. A large table groans with an assortment of fruit – luscious peaches, sliced cantaloupe, ripening limes and browning bananas – as a female figure in a pressed white blouse and pale pink cardigan trims the stems of a profusion of white lilies. Through the window, the geometric skyline of New York dissolves in a summery haze. A man in a wrinkled, white shirt leans into the wall at a distance from his wife, his head turned away from the woman, distracted.

The two are pillars in this grand memento mori, presiding over a table of such savory freshness that the freshly dusted boule in the foreground nearly exudes its doughy scent. In all of its lapidary exactitude, the painting exudes tension. Why should such a couple, at the pitch of private wealth, seem so emotionally distant?

In a similar way, Joseph McNamara's "Madrid Interior (Portrait of Antonio López García)" faithfully reproduces the kitchen of the subject, who sits with his arms folded, lips curled in deep thought. From the aluminum cans on the kitchen table to the hint of paper towels to the colored magnets affixed to the refrigerator, this is a familiar scene of domestic disarray. The only hint of the figure's profession are the red-stemmed paintbrushes, which nestle like breadsticks in a paper troth. This kind of realism is not universally embraced by contemporary artists, some of whom consider it neo-academic – a bit passe. But it's hard to quibble with such bracing exactitude, particularly when accompanied by such palpable ambiguity.

The final galleries explode with the fresh, colorful heterodox and occasionally confrontational work of contemporary artists. Identity is key here, whether it is Radcliffe Bailey exploring his family's experience in slave trade in "Transatlantic," Irene Hardwicke Olivieri's carving into loss with her absorbing "The Oregon Trail," Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's inversion of the word "Red" for Native Americans in "I See Red," or Hung Liu's haunting upending of Asian gender tropes, "Relic 12."

Looking at these works, which explode with texture, unorthodox media and ignored narratives, it's clear what previous aesthetic revolutions missed. In the immediate post-war period, artists like Gottlieb, Pollock and de Kooning were preoccupied with existential and psychic threats. What they missed were the challenges of those who were neither white nor male but whose concerns for survival were more immediate than imagined.

Those stories are being told now by artists like Liu, who inverts the geisha girl trope, and Hardwicke Olivieri, who etches the words, aspirations, animals and natural world of indigenous people on the bark-like face of her female subject. Other artists, like Negar Ahkami, reach into the antiquity, in this case Persia, for the blindingly ornamented “Backsplash.”

Fay Ku does the same in her retelling of the mythic story of Hermes and Argus in “See What You Do.” The graphite and watercolor work is a beautiful retelling of the admonitory story of Hermes’ killing of Argus, the watchman, after which the goddess Hera immortalizes the eyes of her dead watchman in peacock feathers. Those feathers are the only color in Ku’s work, a scintillating, shimmering puzzle of jade greens and sapphire blues. The figure presses forward into a vast forest of birch trees, their bark replaced by eyes.

For the artist, the lesson is how blind we are to the consequences of our actions. The messages contemporary artists are sending are far less abstruse than those that preoccupied artists of the post-war period. Though the fear of nuclear annihilation has only grown, contemporary artists are less preoccupied by the apocalypse and more by the urgency to tell their own stories in a manner in which the rest of the world will take notice.

IF YOU GO

What: “From the Vault: Post-War to Contemporary Art”

Where: New Britain Museum of American Art

When: Through Oct. 29

How: Visit nbmaa.org or call 860-229-0257