

Color me impressed

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By Aaron Wallis

Most cities under a half-million lack a museum collection showcasing the history of modern art to the depth achieved by Heather James Fine Art in its two new exhibitions “Masters of Impressionism and Modernism” and “Forest for the Trees.”

In college, most people chose a major that would enable them to make money in the real world. Unlike most people, I took nothing but useless liberal arts classes including 29 credits of art history and critical theory. If you missed out in college, take heart, it's never too late to get your culture on. Visiting Heather James will provide a comprehensive survey of modern art history.

Let's start at the beginning of modern art — Impressionism. At the time of Impressionism's inception, painters did not show brush strokes any more than women showed their thighs in public. Perspective, objects or people receding in space according to a mathematical formula had set the expectation. Avant-garde Western artists influenced by Japanese Ukiyo-e woodblock prints discarded the illusion of depth in painting. We can see this first important step in modern art including works by Pierre Augustine Renoir, Claude Monet and Edgar Degas, now at Heather James. The Monet, from his late water lilies period, predicts later abstract brush strokes and bares a notable resemblance to the movement in Jackson Pollock's work. His impaired vision also resulted in some of the most colorful paintings in the history of art.

In his “Danseuses au Foyer,” Degas collaged two pieces of paper leaving an exposed seam on the left margin, which was a shocking shift from the highly polished work of the day. The subject matter, a dancer changing clothes, was considered quite erotic and inappropriate. I'm not sure we can appreciate, in the era of “sexting” and Internet pornography, the controversy aroused by this work. Henri Matisse also exposed his labors on a wonderfully tactile and modeled bronze. Whereas the bronzes of the time had smooth and highly refined and polished surfaces, Matisse left his fingerprints on the body of his subject.

As Impressionism gained a measure of public acceptance, artists again pushed against the popular taste of the time. The Fauves were a short-lived art movement most active between 1905 and 1907. Fauve translates in English to ‘wild beasts’ and is reflective of the public perception of the movement. Matisse, Andres Derain and Kees Van Dongen are among the notable artists in the movement. Heather James gallery owner Jim Carona was exceptionally proud of Van Dongen's “Recuerdo de Toledo.” According to Carona, this work is important to art history because it is one of the first examples of arbitrary color in place of flesh tone. The nude girl in “Recuerdo de Toledo” has a large amount of green in her skin.

Personally, I think she's a babe, and I would totally date a woman with green skin, if she was smart, cultured, funny and had a great ass. I am starting to sound like a skipping CD, but the public of the early 1900s considered these paintings ugly. If modern art is born in the Impressionist era, then Surrealism and Cubism constitute its adolescence. Surrealism is not quite as much fun as Dada, but always good for a laugh. Embracing nonsensical concepts is essential to the development of art. Art does not have to do anything, be useful or even make sense. These are all completely irrational demands to make of art. Beauty is nice, but relative and not necessarily a criteria for judging art. Art of the early modern period was trying to make sense of the modern world, and it changed to reflect the uncertainty of the times.

I think many people feel more comfortable with classical art because it reflects the certainty of the time it was made. Just as modern art makes many people uncomfortable because it reflects a time of uncertainty. Many people, artists included, began to feel technology was not necessarily making the world a better place. Honestly, I can't fault people for preferring a colorful landscape to a horse shot full of arrows in a tank of formaldehyde. But I am getting ahead of myself — we will get to Postmodernism soon enough, so try to contain your excitement.

There are two excellent examples of surrealism hanging in the back gallery at Heather James. Ferdinand Leger was one of



Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of musquetaire triste*, 1968, Aquatint, 19.4 x 16.2 in.

the early members of the Surrealist movement. His piece "La Racine Noire et Fragment D'Objects" shows brightly colored amorphous abstract shapes that could be nylons, wheels and god only knows what, converging into a non-sensual structure. The piece uses bright, simple, unmixed colors straight out of a box of crayons. The color scheme of "Quand L'Heure Sonnera" by French painter Rene' Magritte is more subdued.

A gray landscape recedes towards a blue sky. The bust of a woman is hanging out in the middle of this empty gray landscape. A little dirigible is floating across the sky going nowhere in particular. This painting makes absolutely no sense, but that is the entire point. Magritte intentionally juxtaposed nonsensical objects that do not belong together.

Four amazing Picasso's are spread between the galleries at Heather James. Although none of them are from Picasso's Cubist body of work. According to Carona, Heather James acquired then sold Picasso's work from the seminal NY Amory Art Show of 1913. The Amory show inspired an entire generation of abstract American artists. Including Max Weber, Milton Avery and Hans Hofmann, who are also represented by work at Heather James. After seeing the versatility of Picasso's work, it becomes readily apparent why Picasso is arguably the most important figure in the history of art.

Picasso painted "untitled male figure" in his teens. The young Picasso was already technically superior to the vast majority of Renaissance Painters. Picasso then invents his more popular Cubist work but eventually switches up styles again. Picasso abandoned Cubism's faceting of planes and replaced it with expressionistic and occasionally childlike drawing. "Portrait de Mousquetaire Triste" is an exceptional aquatint from 1968. Rosin is used to create a resist on a metal etching plate. The plate is etched in acid and then printed off a press. The bold and expressive lines are some of the most powerful in Picasso's 100,000-plus body of work.

"Homme à L'agneau, Mangeur de Pastèque et Flûtiste" is typical of many late Picasso works, embracing childlike technique, grotesquely oversized feet with anatomically incorrect toes and a head scrunched up against the top margin because he ran out of space on the paper. The line work is simple childlike out lines with a brown crayon. But these few lines say so much.

"Forest through the Trees" picks up after the Modernist period ends, transitioning into the Postmodern. Organized by gallery curator Chip Tom, much of the work is from the Postmodern period though it also reflects Asian sensibilities.

Postmodernism is a critique of modernism, or more accurately, in a state of continual self-critique. Modernism believed it was heading towards something better, or noble. But once art for art's sake was validated and accepted, there was nowhere left to go but looking inward on art and creating art that critiques the process.

If that sounds confusing and makes no sense, blame the French. Hey France, we won the war on terror, freed Iraq, liberated Afghanistan and everybody loves us. Who's smart now? French Structuralist thinking, notably Michelle Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes plays a major role in the foundation of postmodern art theory. I am not going to attempt to explain the connection between Structuralism and Postmodernism because anyone still reading by this point will start thinking about what he's missing on "Jersey Shore." To sum up, Postmodern art embraces processes of structure, self-critique, linguistic interpretation and inherent architecture.

Tom describes his curatorial impetus for "Forest through the Trees" as the "architecture of nature," or the inherent structure of natural objects not the objects themselves. Much of the work is either by Asian artists or reflects an Eastern influence through repetition of patterns and structure in the natural world. It's a very Zen sensibility.

I ran into one of the exhibiting artists, Robert Ketchum when he popped by the Artlab to check out my silk-screening. Ketchum's piece "Golden Light in Late Evening" began as a collection of photos, then he hired 10 master Chinese embroidery artists to painstakingly recreate the image over two years. The artists split a strand of silk into 42 different strands during the weaving process. When one considers the man-hours to create a work that embraces the materials of nature to create structure reflective of nature, the \$90,000 price tag seems like a bargain. And I'm sure sewing for Ketchum beats working in the Nike Factory.

Fine Fieldmen's painting is imbued with complex layered surfaces. This is the type of painterly work that references the process of painting and really starts me salivating. Fieldmen's work is based on the structure of the tree. Bright and varied colors are layered with vertical brush strokes creating work while abstract, is also decidedly reminiscent of tree trunks. The process involves media including oil, ink, Asphaltum on Mylar on linen on paper. The result is a wonderfully layered and

complex surface film that captures and refracts light like the best Impressionist work. Fieldman's work was acquired from the Ace Gallery in Los Angeles; I wandered by Ace a few years ago and I feel very fortunate to be seeing work of that caliber in Jackson.

Japanese artist Kaoru Mansour also uses a complex layering process to create a structure for her surfaces. Delicate bits of botanical elements are collaged in layers with encaustic wax process over panel. The mixed media result is work of intrinsic beauty. The pomegranates in her painting "Iro" are exact botanical specimens but are separated from the inherent clutter of their natural environment. The result is a wonderfully integrated organic expression that takes nature from its natural element and allows us to appreciate it in a new light.

I enjoy painting that references nature but also moves beyond standard perspectives like "Clearing, Skyward View" by Matty Byloos. The point of view is from the perspective of lying on the forest floor looking skyward. Byloos uses Prismacolor wax pencil and layers of acrylic paint to create a mysterious and ethereal surface. Light greens and blacks are obscured beneath washes of white, and covered with dark washes again. The structure of the branches and the needles frames the border with a patch of sky showing through in the center. The painting captures the misty, ethereal feeling of a damp forest environment. At \$4,000, "Clearing, Skyward View" is quite a bargain. I was tempted to wipe out my savings with one purchase, but I figured as great as Matty's work is, it won't nourish me thorough the long cruel Jackson Winter.

Other highlights not to miss are the botanical work of Penelope Gottlieb who recreates extinct plants in her work. And the exquisite basket collection by master Japanese craftsmen. Highly regarded in their native Japan some of these artists are bestowed with the title "National Treasure". Again this work starts with natural elements and structure but transcends the limitations of the craft to create something magical. As I alluded to earlier many museums don't have this kind of varied high quality work. Work that traces the entire development of modern art and the direction contemporary art is heading now. The work at Heather James presents a comprehensive survey of the last century and a half of art history.

I feel extremely fortunate to have work of this quality in a county of 20,000. It's practically unheard of and a rare opportunity that should not be missed. JHW

"Masters of Impressionism and Modernism" and "Forest for the Trees" grand opening reception is 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., August 21, at Heather James Fine Art. 200-6090.