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‘Helen Lundeberg: A Retrospective’ Review

A look back at a leader of Post-Surrealism, which advocated rational connections among a painting’s elements.

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Helen Lundeberg: A Retrospective

Laguna Art Museum

Through May 30

Laguna Beach, Calif.

The art of the Southern California painter Helen Lundeberg (1908-1999) is nothing if not clear, and she was nothing if not clear about it: “My aim, realized or not,” she said in 1942, “is to calculate, and reconsider, every element in a painting with regard to its function in the whole organization. That, I believe, is the classic attitude.” That perspective—removed and measured, but never cold or stingy—is continuously visible in what is, surprisingly, the first comprehensive survey (it includes 60-plus works) of this underrated and, in some quarters, barely known artist.



‘Double Portrait of the Artist in Time’ (1935), by Helen Lundeberg. PHOTO: SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

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Along with Lorser Feitelson—first her teacher, then her married lover, and finally her husband—she founded a style widely known as “Post-Surrealism.” It differed from its European predecessor in not being explicitly immersed in dreams and general weirdness. Post-Surrealism advocated rational connections among a painting’s elements, and hoped they would lead a viewer to discover deeper meanings.

In a 1934 manifesto, Lundeberg didn’t mince words. After opining that Surrealist giants Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst were “of no historical value,” Lundeberg proclaimed, “In [Post-Surrealism] alone do we find an aesthetic which departs from the principles of the decorative graphic arts to found a unique order, an integrity of subject matter and pictorial structure unprecedented in the history of art.”

While almost no work of art could ever live up to those words, “Double Portrait of the Artist in Time” (1935) nicely manifests Post-Surrealism’s aesthetic philosophy. In the center foreground sits the artist as a 3- or 4-year-old child, next to a table and a clock. The child’s shadow falls back onto the floor and then climbs up a wall, where it becomes an adult’s. Its head and shoulders nearly coincide with the image of a woman in a small copy of Lundeberg’s own painting, “Artist, Flowers, and Hemispheres” from 1934. The deeper meanings of “Double Portrait”—the delicateness of life and the paradox of memory (the child is much more “real” than the adult)—are revealed by the picture’s clear and rational construction.

Lundeberg’s family moved from Chicago to Pasadena, Calif., in 1912. After graduating in 1930 from what is now Pasadena Community College, she decided to take some art classes at the Stickney Memorial School of Fine Art, where she met Feitelson, who inspired her to pursue a career in art. A decade older than Lundeberg, Feitelson was sophisticated and experienced. He’d seen the bellwether Armory Show in New York in 1913, had maintained his own studio in Greenwich Village at the age of 18, and studied in Europe before relocating to Los Angeles. (Eventually, he’d host “Feitelson on Art” on NBC TV from 1956 to 1963.)

Whatever Feitelson’s influence, Lundeberg was a superb painter from the beginning. The paintings at Laguna trace her path from the mysterious figuration embodied in “Double Portrait,”

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through hard-edged semiabstraction (doorways, arches, roads in the desert), and then close to full-bore formalism.

My favorite is “Studio – Night” (1958). A simplified, flat-shape interior in Lundeberg’s trademark muted hues is punctuated by a more realistic taboret (with the highlighted tops of an open drawer and cabinet door lending a third dimension), on which sits a conventionally modeled apple. On the upper right, a door opens to a dot of a moon hovering in the nocturnal sky. The left-hand third of the picture contains the dark silhouette of a canvas on an easel in front of which—a master touch!—appears Lundeberg’s tilted head as she enters the room. The painting exudes the whole pleasurable loneliness of being an artist.

Although Lundeberg never quite enjoyed the career her work deserved, her path from tyro to virtuoso was hardly one of continuous neglect. As exhibition curator Ilene Susan Fort writes, Lundeberg’s “public career was on the rise during the 1950s” and her “finest and most productive period” occurred in the 1960s.

Some claim that Lundeberg was excluded from “Four Abstract Classicists,” the 1959 show at the Los Angeles County Museum that put the city’s modern art world on the national map, because she was a woman. (The four men exhibited were Karl Benjamin, Frederick Hammersley, John McLaughlin and Feitelson.) Ms. Fort contends, however, that Lundeberg simply “felt that her painting did not fit the parameters [critic/curator Jules] Langsner established for the exhibition.”

Some of her paintings, beginning in the mid-1960s—such as “Wild Planet” (1965) and “Untitled (Soft Planet)” (1969)—wax treacly with interior-decorator pastels, and Lundeberg’s switch from oil to more convenient water-based acrylic is not entirely a blessing. Nevertheless, Lundeberg’s art as a whole possesses all three legs of the tripod on which most good art rests: It’s good-looking, it gives us something to think about, and it conveys the personality of the artist. With this retrospective, the Laguna Art Museum has performed an important service to the history of American art.

Mr Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.