Michener museum looks at how New Hope School impressed later artists

The James A. Michener Art Museum teams iconic works of the past with those of contemporary regional artists in “Death of Impressionism? Disruption & Innovation in Art.”

By OWEN SHRAFT

The James A. Michener Art Museum rhetorically questions whether the movement that put Bucks County on the painter’s map has expired, as a point of entry to a generous helping of work by later artists from the region.

“The Death of Impressionism? Disruption & Innovation in Art” is a lament for the storied New Hope School of painters; instead, it celebrates a never-crowd with thoroughly contemporary attitudes that may or may not have been influenced by impressionist painters.

The exhibit also points out that impressionism persists, contrary to claims of the past. This comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with the local art scene, where many painters think in glints of light rendered in choppy brushstrokes, to cite just one example.

Or, as curator Kirsten Jensen puts it on a gallery panel, the region’s historic style coexists with more progressive ideas, yielding “a dynamic tension between the old and the new, a continuous cycle of artistic dialogue and disruption that in turn fosters stylistic innovation.”

See ART, Page D4

*Silence Before the Storm* by George Inness

The Michener draws on its own holdings to show pictures such as “The Upper Delaware” by Edward Redfield, one of the lords of Pennsylvania Impressionism; and work by past masters including Ben Slocovy and Lloyd Ney (who aimed his Modernist sympathies at the New Hope School’s favored style in 1930 by organizing a counter-exhibit to an Impressionist-heavy show at Phillips Mill). Slocovy’s “Rue Seated (Green Dress)” and Ney’s “Mechanic Street,” both icons of the museum, are among touchstones of the present exhibit.
Art

Continued from Page D1

A seminal work in the Impressionist landscape tradition appears in George Inness’s “Silence Before the Storm” from 1887, which introduces spiritual and psychological themes to the visible world by a painter preoccupied with what he called “that subjective mystery of nature.”

Jensen also brought in works by Hugh Breckenridge, Charles Ramsey and other historic explorers in art. In his undated “View of Gloucester Harbor,” Breckenridge treats the viewer to astounding orange, purple and green clouds, foreshadowing a bittersweet, dreamlike mood at variance with meltingly delicate works such as “The Bombsite’s Yard” and “Night on the Harbor,” where hetripled paint and gold illumination over deep, saturated blues.

Ramsey, a largely unheralded painter of genius in the New Hope art colony, was one of those dissenting Modernists of 1930, but also paired in the best Impressionist style. “Death of Impressionism” includes a tour de force of Ramsey works in three utterly divergent modes.

Among other things, this triad makes one imagine how frequent and animated were the debates in and around the colony’s studios as Ramsey developed his ideas on abstraction in a town where tradition reigned.

Decades later, subversion has the upper hand.

Among contemporary works given pride of place are two series that have fun with canons of the past, Ilja Berger’s “Dead Impressionists” and Peter Paone’s “Ingres’ Masterpieces #1 & 2.”

Berger offers a row of sepia-toned portraits of Bucks County greats, each holding one of his or her paintings meticulously executed in living color. Paone overlaid poster-sized prints of the 19th-century neoclassicist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ portrait “Madame Moitessier” with collages that surreptitiously distort the subject’s serene face and background.

These works hang a sideways glance away from non-ironic portraiture of the early 20th century such as “Beth and Joan (The Sisters),” painted by their father, John Falchuk, in 1914 and with the same title by his student Peter G. Cook in 1928, the year Cook married Joan. Similarly serious in Elna Drigger’s “Undertow (Portrait of Natalie van Vlack),” a rendering of the trouser-wearing subject (a fellow artist of the 1920s) in a heroic pose as though standing on a mountain peak.

The exhibit bridges this gap of sensibility, sort of, with Helen Mirren’s lively portraits of elderly ladies based on masterworks by Rembrandt and Degas.

More transgressive are paintings by Jackie Tilton, who shows two works in which abstract shapes in flat candy colors are layered over somber photographic landscapes. “Liberation Anxiety” from 1967 in particular is a self-fulfilling subject of challenging and hallucinatory juxtapositions.

Three-dimensional works are few, the most striking of which is Vergil Marti’s “On Some Faraway Beach,” one of the artist’s series of wooden structures made of rough boards cut in ornate Chippendale silhouettes and treated to metallic finishes. This one is an extract of color sequences in a popular movie scene of a popular movie painting by James Hamilton from 1887 entitled “Evening on the Seashore.”

The exhibit brings it all back home for the present-day viewer with a revolutionary pair of Peter Campus’ “videoographies,” which break moving waterscapes into self-contained visual units. The viewer who knows little of painting, or even one who does, will be enlightened to learn that in addition to their many other accomplishments, Impressionists may also have invented pixels.

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Life

Continued from Page D1

The current concubine danced into his arms from the corps of the American Ballet Theatre, so you can also infer that he has — if there had been no African-American contributions to the past, there'd be no "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers" and a great deal more.

Last year, organizers tried to officially institute cultural diversity with the short-lived Philadelphia Division, which included a Mexican-American group playing Mexi-