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Michener Art Museum in Doylestown presents 'Death of Impressionism? Disruption & Innovation in Art'

By Brian Bingaman
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The Michener Art Museum in Doylestown

DOYLESTOWN >> What's universally known as impressionistic art originated out of a 19th century rivalry between French masters Eugene Delacroix and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.

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As the collection at Doylestown's James A. Michener Art Museum shows, the early 20th century artists in our area were influenced by the movement. So what's an institution that takes pride in its Pennsylvania impressionist paintings doing hosting an exhibition titled "The Death of Impressionism?"

The full title is "The Death of Impressionism? Disruption & Innovation in Art" — note the question mark. It's a reference to a rift between the emerging modernists and the perceived old guard, that began in 1913 and reverberated for decades.

The major fall exhibit features works as old as the 1870s, up to pieces that were completed within the past few years.

"The Death of Impressionism?", said Michener Museum Gerry and Marguerite Lenfest chief curator Kirsten M. Jensen, is about how every avant-garde becomes "the old guard," and how contemporary artists embraced, rejected or incorporated impressionism's ideas. "We kept the didactics to a minimum for visitors to draw their own conclusions," she said.

One wall of the exhibition, titled "The Landscape," moves from realistic nature scenes by artists like American impressionist John Fabian Carlson to the fantastical 1971 painting "Isotopes of the Future" by Franz Josef Ponstingl.

Those whale song noises you hear are from two 2014 video paintings by Peter Campus, who presents impressionist brushstrokes as digital and in motion.

New Hope/Lambertville area artist Illia Barger commented at a media preview of "The Death of Impressionism?" that although art history is important to artists, terms like impressionism, modernism and minimalism are not. "Artists don't create isms. They might not consider themselves artists of the same type," she said. "People ask me: 'What's your work like?'"

CRISTIN TIERNEY

We have to use the verbiage in existence. We make it, and ‘here we are, here’s what we look like, and here’s the work. What do you think?’”

Barger’s oil painting series, “The Dead Impressionists,” iconizes Pennsylvania impressionists William Langson Lathrop, Fern Coppedge, Daniel Garber, M. Elizabeth Price and Edward Willis Redfield in the exhibit. “I love to look into their eyes and see the disillusionment. (Contemporary Bucks County artists are) the same as they are — we’re just not dead yet,” Barger laughed, adding that she’s working on five more imagined “Dead Impressionists” portraits of artists holding their own paintings.

West Mt. Airy artist Peter Paone had some fun with posters of Ingres’ “Moitessier” that he had sitting around in a drawer. Paone explained that his “Ingres’ Mistress” collage series was a non-sequential and gradual process. “The whole idea is to have this dialogue ... becoming him (Ingres) and rejecting him at the same time. Art never gets better, it only evolves,” he said.

Jonathan Hertzel — a Santa Fe, NM artist that used to live in eastern Pennsylvania, and has a solo exhibition at the Michener Museum till the end of the year — marveled at found materials artist Vik Muniz’s 2005 recreations of Claude Monet cathedral scenes using discarded pigment. “It looks like a rug to me,” Hertzel said, observing the texture and large size of the works