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

By Brian Bingaman
Updated Dec 30, 2016

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.
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?’
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.
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 Shrift

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 newer 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.”

“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 Solowey 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). Solowey’s “Rue Seated (Green Dress)” and Ney’s “Mechanic Street,” both icons of the museum, are among touchstones of the present exhibit.

See ART, Page 04
Art

Continued from Page D1

A seminal work in the Impressionist landscape tradition appears in George Inness’ “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.”

In his undated “View of Gloucester Harbor,” Breckenridge treats the viewer to astonishing orange, purple and green clouds, fostering a bentic, dreamlike mood at variance with unsettling delicate works such as “The Bargebuilder’s Yard” and “Night on the Harbor,” where he employs paint and gold illumination over deep, saturated blues.

Brenton, a largely unacknowledged painter of genius in the New Hope art colony, was one of those dissenting Modernists of 1930, but also placed in the best Impressionist style. “Death of Impressionism” includes a tour de force of Brenton 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 Brenton 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, Jill Barger’s “Dead Impressionists” and Peter Paone’s “Enger’s Macabre: #1, 3, 5.”

Barger offers a row of sepia-toned portraits of Bucks County greats, each holding one of her paintings meticulously executed in living color. Paone overlaid poster-sized prints of the 19th-century neo-classicist

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 portrayals of the early 20th century such as “Beth and Joan (The Sisters)” painted by their father, John Falchuk, in 1954 and with the same title by his student Peter G. Cook in 1958, the year Cook married Joan. Similarly serious is Elna Driger’s “Unbridled (Portrait of Natalie van Vlisch),” a rendering of the tussler-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 Mirzak’s lively portraits of elderly ladies based on masterworks by Rembrandt and Degas.

More transgressive are paintings by Jacko Treston, who shows two works in which abstract shapes in flat candy colors are layered over somber photographed 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 nonsense painting by James Hamilton from 1867 entitled “Snowing on the Seashore.”

The exhibit brings it all back home for the present-day viewer with a revolutionary pair of Peter Campus’ “videographs,” 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.

Gwen Stiff, 215-649-8024; email: gwenf@radionet.com

Share Something Special!