

Eleven Rivington The Boston Globe

Published March 6, 2012

ART REVIEW

CIRCULAR TAKE ON MODERNISM

Show highlighting contemporary artists makes surprising links

By Cate McQuaid



ANDOVER - Really good artists synthesize all they know about art into something original and new. But history is always looking over their shoulders. Take Carroll Dunham as an example. The painter has, over the years, integrated elements of Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, and cartoon imagery.

Dunham has curated "Open Windows: Keltie Ferris, Jackie Saccoccio, Billy Sullivan, and Alexi Worth," at the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, setting four contemporary artists in the context of American

modernism. Four galleries circle a central fifth. Each artist has several recent paintings in a satellite gallery, and in the center, Dunham has orchestrated a particularly quirky take on American modernism from the Addison's collection.

It's a strange show. There's a furtive feeling about the middle gallery, as if we're rooting through dusty and forgotten pieces in somebody's attic. Where are the Pop works that would so fluidly prepare us for Worth's iconographic forms? Where's a Warholian nod to Sullivan's chosen subjects: socialites frolicking in the Hamptons? Why no expressionistic abstractions of the ilk that clearly spawned Saccoccio?

All right, there is a mildly frenetic action painting by Franz Kline on view. Most of the works by better-known artists come across as offbeat, out of sync with what we know of their makers. The four contemporary artists have all mounted paintings that are larger than any of the older paintings - louder and more dramatic. It's almost as if Dunham chose the modernist works so as not to outshine his four protégés.

Allison Kemmerer, the Addison's curator of photography and of art after 1950, shepherded Dunham through the process. He's a Phillips Academy alum, and he had a show of prints here in 2008. Kemmerer told me Dunham had hoped to match Sullivan's sun-drenched, photo-based portraits and still lifes with work by Fairfield Porter, whose realist paintings were clearly an influence. But the Addison doesn't have a Porter in its collection.

Instead, we have an odd Milton Avery, "Artist and Model," (circa 1939) a painting that has more spatial depth, albeit cramped, than we're used to with Avery, and less tonal pop. It's typically formal, a jumbled assortment of planes, with a nude in the foreground leaning her head on her knee.

The tilt of her shoulders exactly matches the angle of a man's bare shoulders in Sullivan's delicious "Max, Sam & Edo." The man entertains two small boys on the beach; one tow-headed tyke gazes into a mirror the man holds. In many ways, the paintings are radically different: Avery's piece is murky, airless, and verging toward abstraction; Sullivan's is bright-toned, wide open, and narrative. Yet those shoulders make a bridge.

Kemmerer says Dunham also thought, naturally, of a Joan Mitchell painting to lead into the Saccoccio gallery - both make abstract work that's wild, juicy, and gestural. But what the Addison had of Mitchell didn't grab him. He draws a surprising link to an abstract painting by Douglas Huebler, better known as a conceptual photographer. The painting, "The Gorge" (1958) is alternately gritty and breathy. Concrete has been mixed into the paint; the canvas looks like tectonic plates buckling.

Saccoccio, meanwhile, uses mica in her paint. Her big, bristling abstractions rush with drips that take abrupt turns and become layered webs of color. In "Right Portrait," Saccoccio's network of stripes - here in white and brown - vanish in a haze that looks created by a blast of hot air on wet paint. The work is in constant motion, a still picture of a violent moment.

Ferris's abstracts draw on street art and Abstract Expressionism, so buzzy and bright they might induce seizures. Irene Rice Pereira's 1951 mixed-media piece "Light Is Gold" is the closest kin. Both artists use layers and grids to create the illusion of flashing lights. But Pereira's work, in which she separates images with levels of ribbed glass, imbuing a jazzy, Stuart-Davis like abstraction with three-dimensionality, is like looking through a smallish window into a model universe.

Ferris's pieces, such as "[[?]]" are comparatively huge, and her spray-painted patterns of gleaming dots and a rough grid of undercoats have a hallucinogenic effect. The herky-jerky motion of the patterns, the hot colors, and the scale threaten to envelop the viewer. There's a sheer force of creation behind these works that Dunham would find familiar.

Worth, in comparison, comes across as fastidious. His crisp paintings on nylon mesh verge, like Dunham's, toward cartoons. In "Desktop" an orange-tinged fist fills the picture plane, crumpling a sheet of paper. The fingers appear double-exposed, with repeating lines to convey their movement and a sense of crushing frustration.

This painter's use of figures is all to formal ends, placing shapes and tones in space. The subject of "Leaning Woman" is yellow and nearly featureless in a black dress, her hands on her raised knees, her head draped on the back of the sofa upon which she lounges. Again, she appears to move; her arm shifts, her fingers wag. Someone else's shadow - the artist's? - falls across her. And so we circle back to Avery's "Artist and Model."

It's not a closed circle; resonances ricochet throughout the show. Like every artist, every curator and every collection focuses an idiosyncratic lens on art history. In the end Dunham positions the four contemporary artists as fresh - but it would be hard to see them as stale in this historical context, which is more foraging trip than canonical.