

Colorado Modernists Shine in New Exhibit

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Perhaps because of our abundant sunshine, art in Colorado is often seen as an extension of Southwestern art. But a major exhibition at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art argues that in the middle of this century, Colorado boasted dozens of modernists whose work reflected trends in New York and elsewhere and who produced paintings and sculptures that speak with conviction today.

"Vanguard Art in Colorado 1940-1970," curated by historian and collector John Woodward III and on view through Dec. 23, brings together more than 150 works by over 50 artists, on loan from local galleries and a host of private collections. The show is a lot to take in. The walls of both floors of the building are covered with art, including many examples of similar work. Although Woodward is said to be writing a book on the subject, there is no literature to take away - not even a basic brochure with names and dates.

The art is hung more or less chronologically, but the circular layout of the galleries and sheer numbers can overwhelm a visitor.

Still, the show is a feast for the eye, especially in discovering the stylistic range and skill of Charles Ragland Bunnell, Edgar Britton and other members of the first generation of modernists, followed in the 1950s by artists such as Mary Chenoweth and Roland Detre and in the early '60s by abstract expressionists such as Wilbert Verhelst and Roger Kotoske.

Other notable artists include the poly-stylistic Vance Kirkland, graphics pioneer Herbert Bayer, William Sanderson, Robert Mangold, Angelo DiBenedetto, Eve Drewelowe, Edward Maracek and Beverly Rosen.

Like reviewing the history of modern art through a Colorado prism, one can track key influences on our painters, from Paul Cezanne's planes of color to the cubism of Picasso and Braque, expressionism of Kokoschka, landscapes of Arthur Dove and abstracts of Juan Gris, Paul Klee and Lionel Feininger. I was especially impressed by the work of Bunnell, found in virtually every room, starting with a 1930 "Early Spring" watercolor, followed by the minimalist Mondrian-style 1940 oil "Man and Wife," consisting of a few lines, circles and squares; the abstract 1951 oil "Cripple Creek in Winter" with its impasto slashes; the dripping red and black "Indian Spirit" of 1959, a five-foot abstract with a liquid foreground; and the fiery sky and untitled planet he painted in 1963.

The versatile Britton's Tang Dynasty-shaped "Ave Maria" in travertine stone was made in 1940, while his monoprint nude "Non ni solo pane" (Not by bread alone) is composed of horizontal waves. There's also a handsome mahogany screen he carved.

Kirkland's work also progresses during the decades. His 1931 watercolor "Mountain Ruins near Central City" evokes the Taos school, while his 1955 oil "Black Mysteries in

Space" features oily globules. By the 1970s he was into dots, shown in the abstract "Vibrations of Two Blues, Green and Violet on Yellow."

One of the most striking cubist works is Maracek's 1948 oil "Three Heads" in orange and pastel shades, which contrasts with the square patchwork of his "Splendid Palace of Night" two years earlier.

Chenoweth's early gouache of "Venice" is a delightful convergence of planes in which floors and furniture float into one realm, but her style grows denser and more abstract by 1949's woodblock print "Metropolis" and her 1961 oil collage "Peace," incorporating Chinese newsprint and a giant "X."

I also liked Sanderson's cubist 1948 boat with Cyrillic lettering, the etched lines and sea forms in a 1954 Nadine Drummond watercolor, the vibrant yellow of Janet Lippincott's 1960 oil "Butterfield 8-6618" and Gene Matthews' mystery-filled 1959 oil "On a Hill Near Rome."

Mangold's 1963 mobile "Anemotive Kinetic" and 1966 "Kinetic Thing" with painted black steel and electric motor stand out among sculptures, along with Kotoske's concave "Black Warp Plane" and "Bamboo Splinter Relief" from the same decade.

Coincidentally, the museum also just erected one of the finest Colorado conceptual sculptures of the 1970s - the late Harry Bertoia's "Sounding Sculpture I," commissioned by Colorado National Bank in 1976 and donated to BMoCA last year. This beautiful work, installed between the museum and the Dushanbe Teahouse, is a cluster of thin, 19-foot copper rods welded to an 8foot brass and concrete base. The rods move gracefully in the wind, creating soft chiming and rippling sounds like a metallic forest.

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