

Up against boundaries, together and alone

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | January 24, 2008

Painters William Freed and Lillian Orlowsky met in the early 1930s, married 10 years later, and together left a strong stamp, both socially and artistically, on the art worlds of New York and Provincetown. The joint exhibition of their work at ACME Fine Art twines two bodies of work together in a fine duet. Freed, born in 1902, died in the early 1980s, and Orlowsky died at 89 in 2004.

Both artists worked on murals for the WPA, then studied with Hans Hofmann and became skilled and thoughtful abstract painters. Freed had the flashier career; Orlowsky worked harder to promote his work than hers. Yet her work has its own power and grit, indeed more grit than Freed's; his paintings are marked more by formal elegance.

The exhibit starts with figure drawings Orlowsky and Freed executed in one of Hofmann's classes in 1937. In "Rediscovering William Freed," a catalog for a 2003 show at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum and the Cape Cod Museum of Art, Myrna Harrison recounts a story Freed told about his first lesson with Hofmann. Freed drew an academically precise nude. The Cubist teacher made a disparaging comment, then offered detailed criticism. Freed was hooked.

Of the two nude charcoal drawings, Freed's is closer to representational; he sketched out volumes of shoulder and thigh. The long neck suggests the axle around which the rest of the body twists. Orlowsky's drawing is more spatial: The figure coalesces from the clattering lines that suggest the room around her.

For decades, Freed took the still life as his focus. Many of his works here walk a line between representation and abstraction; that was a Hofmann tenet. His "Still Life" (circa 1950) defines a round table from which juts a blue bottle. There's a bowl, and perhaps a blossom. Freed pushes these forms into the abstract realm by flattening the perspective and adding stuttering gestures that join the plant to the tabletop.

Orlowsky worked from still lifes as well, but it's hard to see the bowls or flowers in her paintings. Her "Still Life" (circa 1942) features panels of translucent color shifting over one another, anchored by blobs of orange and white. It hangs beside Freed's "Still Life" (1952), which sets up similar passages of color in the background, but builds up a dense gathering of forms in the center that reads like an essay on precarious balance.

Orlowsky and Freed have more stylistic commonalities than differences; they shared Hofmann's manner of breaking up reality into blocks of color, for example. What we don't see in this show is how their paths diverged as they matured: Orlowsky turned to collage, then drawing with ink and crayons. Freed's forms expanded and loosened; he never lost his passion for color. Even so, it's clarifying to see what they shared, and what they brought to each other's art.

On the dark side

Three contemporary painters, descendants from the Abstract Expressionist faction of which Freed and Orlowsky were members, have rich and provocative work up at Allston Skirt. They share a grim tone.

John Copeland's dark, expressionistic "Your eyes are so peaceful, but your hands want more" tells a tale of violence or perhaps intimacy, in which a figure kneels over a prone person in the snow. Copeland heightens the narrative ambiguity with his technique: Faces are undefined; the sky is operatically smeared in blue, black, and white.

Logan Grider paints athletically, with big strokes adding up to brawny, disjunctive figures and forms. In "Our-malfuction," he builds the space out of such gestures, and (as in Orlowsky's nude), the space seems to birth a form: a wood stove, with coiled pink logs and smoke as thick as flesh swiveling upward.

Gothic narrative drives Elizabeth Huey's paintings. In "We Spin Till We're Dizzy and Pretend Not to Fall" she deploys several painting techniques, making sharp edges with tape, which cut into sweeping, expressionistic passages that describe the land and sky. It's a nightmarish scene of women dancing, seemingly controlled by a translucent ribbon

operated by a clutch of angels, and more.

Out of India

"Picturing India," a lush group photo show at Bernard Toale Gallery, is more soothing. Laura McPhee's large-scale images, such as one of a patchwork of building facades and rooftops in "View from the Roof of the Dawn House, North Kolkata," bracket the exhibit.

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's intimate, moody black-and-white photos made with a pinhole camera draw you in like little eddies of pattern and story. Martin Brading makes festive and warm color images of roadside shrines. His photo of a Hanuman temple in Rajasthan captures a statue that has been so covered with silver leaf it has lost all definition; it looks like a glistening Casper the Friendly Ghost, wearing an orange scarf.

Although the show is largely atmospheric, Ketaki Sheth's telling portraits of twins from the extended Patel family, who live not only in India but in England and the United States, add a dash of humanity - sometimes sad, sometimes comic, and always in the spirit of family. ■

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