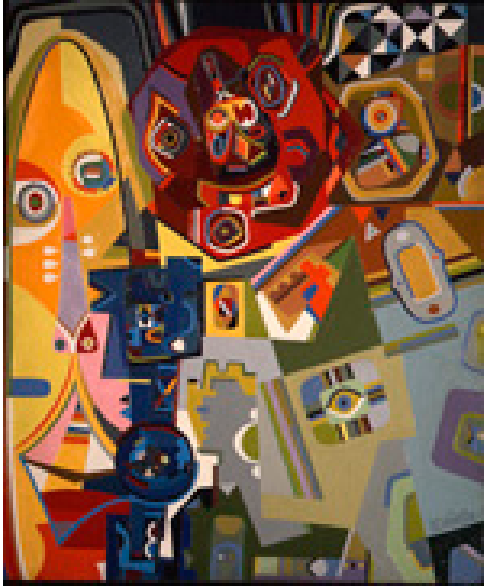


ART + MUSEUMS

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Purely abstract

Montclair exhibit maps out the evolution of an art style

The emergence of abstraction as a major style in American art during the 20th century is probably the single most unusual fact about the art history of the United States, where the style was championed with almost religious intensity immediately after World War II. No other culture embraced the fundamental primacy of Modernist abstraction like we did. Not even cultures where abstraction had long been a principal option, as it was in Chinese or Islamic aesthetics.

“Patterns, Systems, Structures: Abstraction in American Art” is a two-part exhibition at the Montclair Art Museum that uses the permanent collection to map out five paths from the Renaissance-borne idea of naturalistic representation to total abstraction. Those paths go from Manipulation of reality (that is, bending or stretching forms) to Patterns (finding curvilinear overall compositions based on natural shapes), to Structure

(monumental patterns based on technology or architecture) and Systems (mathematically-based orders). The final path examines the Continuum, that is, the seesawing degree of departure from scientific representation of reality acceptable in the visual arts at any point in time.

The story of the embrace of Abstraction is always told like that: Like it evolved from lower forms, or was refined from the lumpy dross that was all art before. Abstraction is treated a little bit like Mitt Romney is in the Republican Party right now, as a sort of statistical inevitability—and whether you like it or not is simply immaterial.

“There are all kinds of reasons for abstraction to happen when it did,” says Montclair’s chief curator, Gail Stavitsky, who chose some 50 works from the permanent collection for the first installment of this show (the second part goes up Feb. 12, and both exhibits then continue through May). “I’m actually working on a show for 2013 that will re-create the Armory Show on its centennial, which was the turning point for sure.

“The impetus came from Europe, and the most progressive

artists went to Paris,” she continues, “where Matisse and Cezanne had a huge and ongoing impact on Americans. But mostly, it was spiritual and scientific—art aspired to be like music, photog-

raphy had made reproducing reality less interesting and things like X-rays had made deeper visual observations possible. And then there was the impact of Freud and Jung, and the science of psychol-



Works exhibited in “Patterns, Systems, Structures” include, from the top: 1949’s “Laughing Boy,” by Steve Wheeler; “Skunk Cabbage,” circa 1927, by Georgia O’Keeffe; and “Abstraction with Artist’s Materials,” 1934, by Arshile Gorky.

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ogy.”

We might also say, for example, that prior to the 20th century art had been enlisted first by the church to express moral priorities, then by civic institutions to promote local loyalties, and finally by nation states to justify empires. And by the beginning of the 20th century, artists were freed of all those purposes—and of all the money that came from those commissions—and they were on their own. Should we be at all surprised that the actual materials and techniques of the traditional visual arts were then applied to looking at art itself?

“Pure” beauty, then, but this show is particular about the role earlier generations played in fostering abstraction (the Continuum, remember?). That’s why a view of Niagara Falls by George Inness and a seascape by James Whistler are here (“The Sea” by Whistler is one of the finest paintings in the collection, Stavitsky says, and a personal favorite). The Whistler is especially apt, and early (painted 1860), almost as simple a seascape as a Milton Avery: Two stripes on the canvas, one for sea and one for sky, with a nice little diagonal (the sailboat) on one end like a checkmark.

Stavitsky has other favorites—the little Morgan Russell, “Study for Synchrony,” done around 1913, is both lovely and one of the earliest color abstractions in the American canon, for example (a real prize for Montclair’s collection). Jay Van Everen’s “Chariot Race,” a razor-cut piece of cardboard painted with lacquer, is a work by an artist almost unknown today, but well represented in the museum; Steve Wheeler’s “Laughing Boy” Reminds us of the Indian Space painters from before World War II and connects a few dots with Montclair’s world-class Native American collection.

We will all have our favorites, and it’s hard to say why, when so many different styles are set so higgledy-piggledy together. Abstraction is hardly over, though Pop and now pure representation have displaced it somewhat. But it may well have reached its apo-

gee very soon after it appeared on these shores; and as long as we’re choosing, I pick “Skunk Cabbage,” by Georgia O’Keeffe, done in 1927, and as full of drama as a deposition.

And it’s not even pure. We should all bend it like Georgia.

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**Patterns, Systems, Structures:
Abstraction in American Art**

Where: Montclair Art Museum, 3 South Mountain Ave., Montclair

When: Through May 19. Open Wednesdays to Sundays from noon to 5 p.m.

How much: Adults, \$12; seniors and students, \$10; children younger than 12, admitted free. Call (973) 746-5555 or visit montclair-art.com.



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