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Entertainment & Life

‘Matters of Life and Death’: Boston Expressionist artist Hyman Bloom saw beauty in the mystery of mortality

By Chris Bergeron, Daily News Correspondent
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BOSTON - Like Michelangelo and other great artists, Hyman Bloom studied human anatomy through cadavers to explore the essential nature of life in beautiful yet disturbing paintings.

A decade after his death, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston is showing 70 stunning paintings and drawings by the Boston-based artist that seek to capture the mysteries of mortality in human viscera laid open on the dissecting table.

In the MFA’s first solo show of the artist’s work, “Hyman Bloom: Matters of Life and Death,” visitors will see singular – and literal - still lifes that will dazzle their eyes while unsettling their stomachs.

At an opening day tour last week, the artist’s widow, Stella Bloom, said she “was trying not to cry” at the long overdue recognition of her husband’s achievements.

“All Hyman wanted to do was paint,” she recalled. “He was a perfectionist.”

As the American art scene embraced abstraction in the 1950s, Bloom went his own way.

In the morgue, Bloom found perfect subjects that simultaneously revealed the beauty and horror of the human experience at the boundaries of life and death.

In 1947 Bloom painted “Female Corpse, Back View,” recalling his first viewing of a cadaver four years earlier as “harrowing” but beautiful – iridescent yet pearly.” “It opened up avenues for feelings not yet gelled. It had a liberating effect. I felt

something inside that I could express through color," he later said.

In his 1944 "Corpse of Man," Bloom painted the exposed organs and genitals of a cadaver with the brilliant tints reminiscent of an Impressionist sunset by Claude Monet.

Reflecting his interest in exploring interconnections between the physical and spiritual realms, Bloom's 1945 oil of a severed limb initially resembles a decaying slab of mutton, but on closer inspection the artist transformed bruises and lesions into incandescent jewel-like forms.

Erica Hirshler, MFA senior curator of American paintings, said Bloom "got beneath the surface of things" to create literal portraits of the dead "pulsating with the life force."

At the mid-century when American art was becoming increasingly abstract, she described Bloom as one of "those bold figures" who remained "committed to the figure and who sought to explore the complex nature of human existence in which" seeming polarities such as "beauty and horror are often inextricably linked."

Hirshler recalled Bloom's art was described in an obituary as embodying "the strength of Michelangelo and the spirituality of (poet, painter and print maker) William Blake."

"These works are important. I find them incredibly beautiful," said Hirshler, who organized the show. "They are on the borderline between abstraction and realism and on the borderline between life and death."

Bloom (1913-2009) may have been uniquely qualified as an artist to paint luminous images of flayed corpses and autopsies that conveyed his own unsparing inquiries into mortality.

Born in Brunoviski, Latvia (now Lithuania), he immigrated at age 7 to the U.S. in 1920 with his parents to join family members who had settled in Boston's West End.

After showing early artistic promise, he earned a scholarship to take high school art classes at the MFA and received encouragement and later financial support from an important artist and a collector, respectively.

Not yet 30, Bloom's work was praised at an influential exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1942.

Always fascinated by the human form, he first sketched cadavers in a 1943 visit with fellow painter David Aronson to the morgue at the Kenmore Hospital in a transformative experience that shaped much of his later career.

The exhibit is divided into five sections that examine Bloom's career chronologically while addressing key themes such as his fascination with underlying forms, his interest in Jewish scripture, Eastern philosophy and mysticism.

The third section, "Still Life," offers several striking works, such as "Cadaver on a Table," and Female Cadaver" that show how Bloom significantly expanded traditional approaches to this genre to include human dissections seen in person but drawn from his imagination.

The wall text explains Bloom was "fascinated by the beauty of the body's internal organs" which he painted in "hot colors that pulsate with life force" as a way to look "beyond mortality seeking an inner truth to the meaning of existence."

For example, in "The Hull" from 1952, an anatomist's bloody hand reveals a section of a disemboweled corpse's ribcage, using his scalpel like Bloom's fluid brushstrokes to untangle a mystery.

The final section, "Bloom As Draftsman," features one of the artist's most recent works, "Seated Old Woman," from 1972-1973, which Hirshler described as "an unsparing, unflinching and beautifully rendered image of a woman aging."

Looking back, Stella Bloom recalled first meeting her future husband when she was 17 at her uncle's restaurant. After meeting again several years later, they married in 1978 and were together until her husband's death at age 96 in August 2009.

She remembered Bloom as utterly devoted to his art but largely reluctant to court fame and popularity with the public and critics.

He would spend hours in his studio listening to Indian and Turkish music, working on a painting, put it aside and complete it two years later, she said.

Stella Bloom said her husband was an exacting craftsman determined to create art according to his own standards at a time abstract expressionism had gained critical favor.

“Hyman was a great painter. He didn’t care about those things,” she said. “All he wanted to do was paint.”

“This exhibit vindicates Bloom’s devotion to a singular vision that has outlasted the critical neglect by his insistence that truth and beauty can be found in the least likely places.

For those visitors who prefer Paul Gauguin’s nubile Tahitians, the astonishing cadavers on display might not be your cup of plasma.

But like a surgeon exposing a tumor, Bloom imbued human guts with all the messy, glorious wonder of life itself.

You’ve already seen Edgar Degas’ idealized ballerinas. Gaze into Bloom’s cadavers and see yourself.