

# ALEXANDRE

DAVID COHEN, Editor

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Color and Ecstasy: The Art of Hyman Bloom  
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Isabelle Dervaux "Color and Ecstasy: The Art of Hyman Bloom" with contributions by John Updike, Matthew Baigell, Sigmund Abeles and Kimberly Lamm, National Academy of Design, 2002, \$26.95

review by **JOEL SILVERSTEIN**



Hyman Bloom *Chandelier I* 1943-45  
oil on canvas, 50 x 25 inches  
private collection  
all images this article courtesy National Academy of Design

Kandinsky coined the phrase "inner necessity" to mark the difference between outer form and inner subject matter as a manifestation of spirituality, paving the way for his innovations in abstract painting. Like the first generation of abstractionists, Hyman Bloom's philosophy constitutes a profound renunciation of materialist culture. Bloom specifically shares with Kandinsky an identification with Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy and other mystical interests of the late Nineteenth Century. There is also an element of pictorial risk taken by both artists in the face of prevailing social norms. But where Kandinsky was led to abstraction as the result of a quasi-religious self-evaluation, Bloom was thrust back into a figurative expressionism of finesse and great intensity. A Latvian-Jewish émigré, born in 1913, Bloom lived in Boston and trained with the Harvard master Denman Ross. In 1940, after viewing the artist's near abstract canvasses of archeological sites, Clement Greenberg, Jackson Pollack and Willem de Kooning dubbed Bloom the greatest artist in America. Bloom promptly rejected abstraction and was quickly forgotten by the New York School. He continued a figurative art based on

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Soutine, Ensor, and Rouault in relative isolation. Symbolist in orientation, his art waxes nostalgically for the Fin de Siècle of Van Gogh and Redon. Other interests- Chassidism, the Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, Asian religions and Hindu music- all inform his work, constituting a catalogue of alterity worthy of the Open Center. Needless to say, his plethora of source materials is at times problematic, but never boring. His paintings produce a queasy, mildly repellent feeling that is yet wholly ecstatic and Dionysian. As fear is transmuted into energy, Bloom insists on a discomfiting apocalyptic tone of self-immolation and bodily sacrifice. Easy entertainment this is not.

Bloom's retrospective at the National Academy of Design covered more than sixty years and was divided into several themes. The work of the 1940's represents ritual aspects of Synagogue life (Chandelier I, 1943-45). However, his most important work of the era is an impressive series of corpse paintings, noticeably executed during the years of the Holocaust. The cadavers were observed from life, as sketches will attest. These dead lumps of flesh are further transmogrified by the artist's own imagination. They leap in El Greco-like stances of ascension, while simultaneously blasted with the chiaroscuro and saccharine colors of decay and regeneration. *Female Corpse, Front View, 1944-5*, *Female Corpse, 1947* and *Corpse of a man, 1944-5* are not a triptych, but constitute a powerful grouping reminiscent of Francis Bacon. In Bloom, an insistence on pictorial caricature is matched by the viewer's own anxiety: the decay of the body's flesh constitutes a full blooded parody of sensuality. Later paintings continue this theme, such as *The Anatomist, 1953*, which reverberates with even greater shocks of death and eroticism. Two arms thrust into the bowels of a flayed corpse, hallucinogenic in its form and coloration. The hot mauves, pinks, greens, and purple-blacks form a Martian-like landscape, in contrast with the scientific gravity of the autopsy. The content can be compared to Thomas Eakin's *The Gross Clinic, 1875* where horror must be sublimated to the greater good of Science. In Bloom's world, it is the other way around: Science is a mask or front, behind which mystical transcendence urges us to shed the corporeal body of flesh.



Hyman Bloom *Corpse of a Man* 1944-45  
oil on canvas, 72¼ x 34¼ inches

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham MA, Gift of Mr. Henry Crapo, Hull MA

In some ways Bloom over-illustrates his ideas and passions. A series of séance paintings from the 1950's documents the artist's work as reportage. Bloom

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carefully researched his topic through newspaper articles and descriptions of mediums, ghosts and manifestations of protoplasm. The artist here engages in a very strange recontextualization of Italian Mannerism (Pontorno, Parmagianino) grafted onto the color bursts of Redon. Most successful is *Séance II* 1957, where a medium and a few spectators are overtaken by ghostly apparition, replete with floating head. As corny as this might sound, the artist imbues this work with a formal incandescence of chalky scrim over muted maroon, over an ingenious structure of fluid green. The face of the medium is bloated with anger, stretched beyond human logic. Bloom relies on traditional forms of religious spiritualism as the core of his pictorial ideas. The danger exists in confusing the experience of otherness, with an illustration of it. Depictions of spirits are here grounded in the remnants of historical styles and nostalgia is engendered for eras when such depictions were wholly encouraged in artistic representation. I surmise a good chunk of Bloom's creepiness resides in his obsession with the past as a Freudian model of repetition compulsion, of the process of art history itself becoming fetishized. But Bloom is too good a painter and colorist to make any of the works truly retrograde or unsuccessful.

It is in his later work that Bloom achieves true independence from his artistic masters, as well as creating important parallels with art of the 1980's and 90's. It seems that by painting in the New Hampshire woods, the artist has created a fresh and astonishing body of work. For a man in his seventies or eighties, it is unexpectedly energetic, visionary and headstrong. *Seascape II* 1985 bears the tumultuousness of Turner or Ryder in its Northern Romanticism. But, the storm has whipped up a school of self-devouring fish heads, as anarchic as an Alexis Rockman or as inevitable and punishing as the Ten Plagues of Egypt. The environment is out of control and someone, clearly must pay. In *The Facts of Life*, 1982-3 a bravura and heart stopping series of stippled hashmarks tear two nudes asunder. The female at right, visible by her breasts, lies amid puddles of orange and ruby, trailing off into clouds of black, ultramarine and acid yellow. On the left, a male nude is almost invisible, with the exception of his stricken erect penis. As a storm of paint erupts, an Aldorfer-like landscape shifts the scale away from the body as a source of measurement. Sexual longing and reassurance is dissolved in an effluvium of violence, and corrosive acid. Is that all there is my friends? Clearly, the depiction of a rotting environment and decayed truncated bodies, places Bloom in the company of Gregory Gillespie, Kiki Smith, the Chapman brothers or Magdalena Abakanowicz. Many such examples of contemporary art consider the flesh within a Neo-Gothic language, usually omitting Bloom's emphasis on the spiritual. Humorously in this context, the artist's oeuvre, so necrophiliac by nature, is also strangely optimistic.

In the late works, the artist has successfully transposed the techniques and ideas of the corpse paintings onto traditional genres, such as still life and landscape with surprising force. *The Blue Carafe* 1982-3 and *Still Life with Brown Floor*, 1982-3 depicts a world in constant flux, defined by color and tangential forms that glow with hidden meanings. Jim Dine tried many of these tricks in his works of the 1980's, yet I find Bloom's painting infinitely more effective and less contrived. In *Fall Landscape II*, 1981-4 or *The Woods in Lubec*, 1986, the artist depicts a world of close tonal value, where the horizon line is softened and projected on to the picture plane as in Asian ink painting. The colors are more muted than his earlier works, but the overall feeling is one of a Hericlitean universe, where corpses become trees and all our moral judgments and fears merely fade away. Bloom is very much alive and painting. He is entering his ninth decade and shows no sign of slowing up. Perhaps it is true that his reaction against Abstract Expressionism and Clement Greenberg was neither strong nor original enough to constitute a one person movement. He offers no ultimate answers to the problems of history or the invention of a formal style, as in the work of Phillip Guston. His achievement lies in a figurative expressionism, championed and advanced despite minimal critical attention. While his subjects may strike some as melodramatic or even sticky in their overt Gothicism, his instincts are ultimately in tune with our times. Hyman Bloom's obvious love for the craft of painting is, in itself, a life-affirming and erotic impulse.

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