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ART REVIEW

Boston Expressionists get their due

At Danforth, 'Voice' exhibits large collection of area's best

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, December 27, 2011, 12:00 a.m.



Among the works in "The Expressive Voice" exhibit is "Seascape II," by Hyman Bloom. (DANFORTH MUSEUM OF ART)

FRAMINGHAM - The Danforth Museum of Art, thanks to its attention in recent years to a strain of artists known as the Boston Expressionists, has lately been showered with gifts from collectors of Boston Expressionism. This particular school of art skewed toward narrative and representation as Abstract Expressionism exploded and ran roughshod over figuration.

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"Under the Chandelier," by Karl Zerbe.

"The Expressive Voice," a big and invigorating show now up at the Danforth, celebrates the windfall. There are 112 works in the exhibit, primarily new acquisitions. Maybe this particular style of painting is finally getting its due.

Hyman Bloom and Jack Levine were its progenitors starting in the 1930s. They made paintings that employed wild color, dynamic gesture, and emotional resonance free of irony. Both came of age in Jewish immigrant communities in Boston, attending settlement house art classes, and were keenly influenced by the starkness and angst of German Expressionism, and by other Jewish artists and pioneers of Modernism, such as Marc Chagall and Chaim Soutine. Another key player was Karl

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"degenerate." Zerbe taught a generation of artists at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts.

In the 1940s, these three had great success. In a catalog essay for the Danforth's Hyman Bloom show, the museum's director Katherine French relates that Willem de Kooning said he and Jackson Pollock considered Bloom "the first Abstract Expressionist in America." But Bloom spurned pure abstraction, calling it "emotional catharsis, with no intellectual basis." So he left the art market behind, not to mention the attention of curators, even in his hometown. The Museum of Fine Arts, for instance, has hardly blinked at Bloom.

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But the collectors, many in the Boston area, have been faithful. It's fascinating to note that while Boston has for decades been a conservative city in terms of collecting contemporary art, Boston Expressionism is an exception. This show even includes a painting by Joan Snyder, who does not live or work in Boston, but is so well-collected here she might as well be a native. Of the recent gifts, French said in an interview, "there are people falling all over themselves trying to donate. They know we're not going to put it in the basement."

"The Expressive Voice" explores Boston Expressionism very nearly up to the present. It's great fun to follow threads through generations of teachers and students, and in one case, a parent and child. At the Museum School, Zerbe taught a clutch of acolytes who developed solid careers, including David Aronson, Arthur Polonsky, Henry Schwartz, and Barbara Swan.

Aronson went on to run the painting program at Boston University, and brought Philip Guston to teach there. While at BU, Guston forsook pure abstraction for figuration, outraging critics and colleagues. John Walker, who heads the art program at BU now, makes sumptuous, gritty, painterly

abstractions that incorporate landscape and figuration, also fits the bill - he has work in this show. Too bad Guston doesn't!

These schools have produced painters who continue the tradition today, such as Jon Imber and Gerry Bergstein. You can see how Bergstein picked up some of his bag of tricks from his teacher, Schwartz. Both make use of trompe l'oeil and collage (or, in Bergstein's case, trompe l'oeil that looks like collage). Imber's portrait of his teacher, "Portrait of Philip Guston in a Green Coat," was made in 1982, two years after Guston's death. Another Boston Expressionist tenet: They tend not to work from life, but from imagination and memory. Imber captures Guston with heavy-lidded eyes that are almost too wide, in loose, jittery strokes, and coalescing his skin tone from red, blue, and green.

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Boston Expressionism has always been luscious, bright, and deeply felt. Bloom's "Seascape II" (1974) teems with red and blue fish in a terrifying eddy, jaws wide, consuming one another. Their scales shimmer amid ripples of water - the paint handling is masterful - spinning in an endless vortex of devouring. Zerbe's 1948 gouache piece "Under the Chandelier" borrows one of Bloom's motifs, a chandelier, but where Bloom painted just the glimmering lights, Zerbe sets a man beneath a perilously large, skewed, and glowing light fixture.



"Garden (Inflorescence)," by Renee Rothbein.

Swan painted her son, Aaron Fink, in "Baby," (c. 1955) a newborn with an expression that melds excitement with antic horror, held high in a man's hand (could it be that of Alan Fink, Swan's husband, and the founder of Alpha Gallery on Newbury Street?) against a patchy, gold-orange ground. Aaron Fink grew up to be another Boston Expressionist, like Walker a hopeless lover of

paint and its messy possibilities. His "Hat," (1991) all brightly smeared, squeegeed, and deliciously tactile in hot reds and yellows, is on view.

There are also some new faces in the crowd. Renee Rothbein, who died in 2001, never received much institutional interest; she has one piece at the Art Institute of Chicago. Yet here is her "Garden (Inflorescence)" (1969), effusive with a fulgent cluster of warm blooms viewed from above against a <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/2011/12/27/boston-expressionists-get-their-due/qeNBQG45xBSZ6SoLw1C6N/story.html>

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There's something soothing in the emotional clarity of much of the work - even the anguish, pain, and confusion. It's less heady and theoretical, more directly affecting than a lot of art today. And what better medium than paint to depict the messiness of life? The Danforth is tapping a largely

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