Bloom's Way

At once dark and celebratory, the art of Hyman Bloom finds the spirit triumphant in even the most dire circumstances. A recent exhibition surveyed the career of this independent visionary painter.

BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

Not surprisingly, works that seek to convey mystical experiences don't fit neatly into art-historical genres or categories. Even the most intriguing artists who have variously depicted otherworldly spiritual states, such as Hilma af Klint, Charles Burchfield, Alfred Jensen and Agnes Pelton, are often left out of standard accounts of movements and trends. For more than 60 years, American painter Hyman Bloom (b. 1913) has represented heightened states of being with a kind of fevered intensity. A retrospective exhibition of over 60 paintings and drawings at the National Academy of Design, curated by Isabelle Dervaux, revealed the complexity of an underacknowledged artist whose fervent works variously evoke those of Matthias Grünewald, Chaïm Soutine and Francis Bacon.

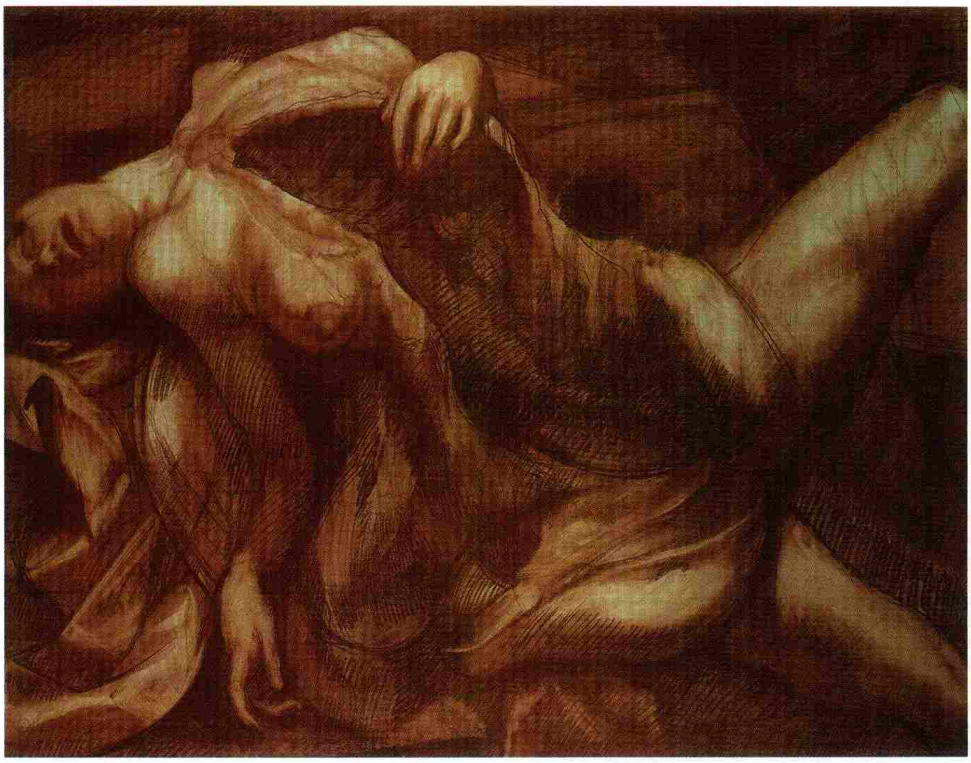
Although not widely recognized today, Bloom has had a small but dedicated following. First exhibited in "Americans 1942," Dorothy Miller's Museum of Modern Art showcase for emerging artists, his work appeared in the 1950 Venice Biennale alongside paintings by de Kooning, Pollock and Gorky. A loner and slow worker, he has made art in relative isolation from art-world centers, living in Boston and, for the past 20 years, in rural New England. Since his 1954 traveling midcareer retrospective organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, he has primarily been known as an "artist's artist," admired for his precise draftsmanship and command of nacreous, autumnal color.

Raised an Orthodox Jew, Bloom broke away from organized religion after his bar mitzvah at age 13 but has nevertheless maintained an ambiguous, curiously intense relationship with Judaism while following a decidedly unorthodox spiritual path. He has pursued a variety of mystical and esoteric philosophies, spurred by an interest in theosophy, séances, astrology, and Indian and Eastern music. After reading Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* in 1954, he experimented with LSD. His far-ranging attempts to depict the supernatural have led him to odd and tough-minded subject matter—including a startling 1940s series of paintings of corpses—that has made for difficult acceptance by a wide audience.

Bloom's work seems to have fallen through the cracks of art history for reasons besides its perceived morbidity and supernatural themes. During the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, he remained resolutely interested in figuration. Moreover, his unconventional treatment of the symbols and attributes of the religion he renounced paradoxically seem to have made his art "too Jewish" for some and, for others, "not Jewish enough." These factors give the work a new relevancy in a contemporary art world preoccupied with the body and identity and intrigued by alternative metaphysical ideas.

Female Corpse, Front View, *1944-45, oil on canvas, 70 by 42 inches. The Jewish Museum, New York.*

A Leg, *1944-45, oil on canvas, 25 by 50 inches. Collection Anatole Pohorilenko.*



Female Cadaver, *1954, sanguine conté crayon on paper, 34½ by 44 inches. Collection Judith Hayman.*

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From the outset of his career, Bloom attempted to find visual analogies for spiritual states and religious ideas. His best-known early work, *Synagogue* (ca. 1940), sought to capture the heightened rapture of the Orthodox Jewish cantorial music that he had appreciated as a child in the small Latvian village of his birth. Depicting a synagogue service on a High Holy Day, the expressionistic painting is a dense cluster of religious symbols and upwardly gazing, swaying choral singers, lit by swinging, glittering chandeliers.

The heightened emotionalism of Eastern European Hasidic music has remained a key inspiration for the artist. In her helpful catalogue essay, Dervaux cites a recent interview in which Bloom stated, "A Jewish feeling in art is often reflected through a sense of nervous energy or exuberance—pathos—angst . . . it is epitomized by the music of the synagogue . . . it is weeping from the heart."

Bloom's freely applied strokes of highlighted gold and yellow convey a vibrant exuberance not often associated with Orthodox Judaism. Recent paintings rendered in an even more gestural style depict elderly rabbis who clutch golden-lit Torahs, symbols here of an unquestioning, ecstatic faith. The passionate brushwork and attention to light, ambience and color convey rapturous sensory emotions rather than endorsing any specific religions or dictates. In his catalogue essay, art historian Matthew Baigell tracks Bloom's unusual, often enigmatic treatment of Jewish themes and symbols, relating his work to that of artists as diverse as Max Weber and Eleanor Antin.

A respectful yet eccentric iconoclast, Bloom spins off from religious symbols with abandon, his work readily distinguishable from Chagall's more familiar folk-tinged and nostalgic depictions of Jewish themes. The figure in *The Bride*, 1943-45 (as Baigell points out, a Talmudic symbol of the Sabbath), is an emanation of bejeweled fancy that conjures the works of Florine Stettheimer. This full-length personage is wrapped in a swirling, patterned cloak decorated with Ensor-like faces, fragmented paisleys and dizzy patterns. From a low, angled perspective, *Chandelier II* (1945) boldly portrays a close-up of a glittering crystal light fixture, framed by ceiling ornaments that look like musical clefs. Outlined in yellow-gold, the bluish-silver glass becomes a dense, upbeat symbol of pure radiance. Attesting to Bloom's nonsectarian interest in spirituality, the "Christmas Tree" paintings of the early 1940s have a similar warmth and spiritually tinged glow.

Dervaux details the remarkable education which Bloom received from a couple of eccentric, community-minded Boston art teachers, Harold Zimmerman and Denman Waldo Ross, who independently recognized the talents of the precocious young immigrant as well as those of his

Law of the Fishes, *1956, white ink on black paper, 20 by 25 inches. Collection David J. Goldberg.*

friend and later rival, Jack Levine. Zimmerman's approach was to urge his students always to draw from memory and imagination rather than from life. An emphasis on interior vision was lastingly instilled in Bloom, empowering his attempts to depict the unseen and otherworldly.

Early on, Bloom determined that the transcendence of the corporeal could be conveyed through the depiction of death and decay. He has repeatedly stated his admiration for the unflinchingly realistic depiction of the suffering Christ in Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* and has credited Hans Holbein's harrowing *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* as the inspiration for his own expressionistic *Skeleton* (ca. 1936, not in the exhibition). A research trip to the morgue of Boston's Kenmore Hospital in 1943, however, introduced him to firsthand subject matter that represented what he later described as "the paradox of the harrowing and the beautiful."

Bloom's two haunting paintings, *Female Corpse, Front View* and *Corpse of Man* (both 1944-45), are light-strewn, overhead views of bodies riddled with sores and rotting flesh, depicted in rich, burnished golds, reds and browns. Framed by pulled-back shrouds, the naked bodies lie in a state of nascent, otherworldly transformation. With her face tilted back and arms nearly akimbo, the still plump, fleshy woman seems poised for ascension into a higher realm. The more heavily shrouded man with exposed, festering belly and large, partly erect, mottled penis asserts the presence of sexual regeneration even in death.

Layering and juxtaposing lush red, orange and flesh tones, Bloom skillfully exploits the iridescent properties of oil-based paint, utilizing them metaphorically to convey a surmounting of materiality. In a 1957 statement cited by Dervaux, Bloom asserted the unity of his medium and concepts: "For me, paint and thought amount to the same thing. . . . They are an attempt to cope with one's destiny and become master of it."

Bloom's 1950s paintings of autopsies pursue more literal "out-of-body" experiences. *The Anatomist* (1953) is a full-length overhead view of a flayed body, executed in wild brushstrokes. The anatomist's hands pull back the body's organs to reveal a black cavity beyond. Light from above glistens on the bloody, imprecisely rendered, gut-strewn corpse. This is a human being in the process of physical disassembly, a grotesque process that evokes a kind of ecstatic frisson. *The Hull* (1952) presents a human corpse whose rib cage is being extracted. Knife-wielding hands are visible at the left, as flesh flops forward from the exposed bones. Layers of multihued brushstrokes emulate seething decay. The depiction of human dissection enables Bloom to turn figuration inside out, always in search of transcendence.

The paintings of the occult from the same period reveal a less brutal unhousing of the physical. Here, dreamy Symbolist colors and ghostly veils of paint impart supernatural effects. In the Redonesque *The Medium* (1951), a trio of masklike, misty emanations hover above a golden-clad psychic in a trance. The more loosely rendered *Materializing Medium* (ca. 1955-57) features three spirits that radiate from the body of a veiled

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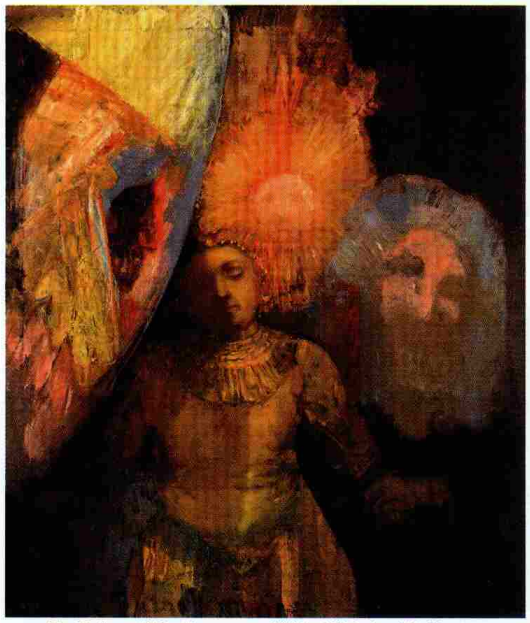

The Medium, ***1951, oil on canvas, 40¼ by 34¼ inches. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.***

clairvoyant whose pale wraithlike hands make nervous, theatrical gestures. A series of "Séance" paintings (1954-57) employ exuberant, expressionistic brushwork to convey the evanescence and flailing violence of the spirit world.

With these dissolutions of the human form, Bloom seems to have taken spiritually charged, figurative expressionism in painting as far as he could go. For a decade, beginning in the late 1950s, he abandoned painting for drawing, aiming for a different path to the otherworldly. Inspired by the dense coastal forest of Lubec, Maine, as well as the prints and drawings of Redon and Rodolphe Bresdin, he produced a group of large, busily articulated landscapes in charcoal. *Landscape #2* (1962) depicts a gnarly tree trunk that emerges from a shadowed nest of swirling roots and overgrowth. Devoid of new growth, the twisted, barren spinal column seems to exist for its own bleak sake.

This classic notion of the sublime indifference of nature reaches its apotheosis in two large, theosophically based drawings, each titled *On the Astral Plane*. The first, subtitled *In a Cave* (1965), presents a murky, web-filled interior where lurk obscure, frightened faces, Piranesian arches and spiders out of Redon, all intricately drawn and densely shaded. The horror vacui evidenced in the compulsive act of drawing seems nurtured by Bloom's conception of a teeming, threatening nature that incorporates decay and dead souls. By rendering this grim, impenetrable vista, he seems to channel its dark power.

In *On the Astral Plane: Cold Anger* (1966), Bloom goes further, unleashing malevolent, sinister forces in the amorphous body of a monster. Barely discernible in the gloom are insect legs, fanged teeth, one reptilian eye and podlike torsos. The disjunctive creature twists back, filling the space, as if to make confrontation unavoidable. In a recent interview with Dervaux, Bloom explained that the two drawings were devoted to the lower astral plane, one of the stages in the general evolution of consciousness. This level is "an area of dreams, nightmare, unhappy emotional states, an indivisible world of suffering, in opposition to the higher plane, which is a paradisiacal world." Asked why he only drew the lower plane, he replied, "You draw your experience."

With its daringly extreme treatment of death and regeneration, Bloom's work enjoys a contemporary pertinence missing in the chest-thumping efforts of many of his Ab-Ex generation. Bloom shares a conceptual affinity with a host of today's artists—such as Kiki Smith, Paul McCarthy, Cindy Sherman and Zoe Leonard—who have explored radical ideas about the body. Similarly, Bloom's extraordinary charcoal drawings from the 1960s depicting dense, spirit-haunted forests feel completely at home in these neo-gothic times. Objections to his macabre subject matter are no longer appropriate in an art world that celebrates Hans Bellmer, Hermann Nitsch, Joel-Peter Witkin and Matthew Barney. Given further exposure, Bloom's grotesquely powerful, mystical art is ready to stop jaded viewers in their tracks. □

"Color & Ecstasy: The Art of Hyman Bloom," curated by Isabelle Dervaux, was shown in New York at the National Academy of Design [Oct. 2-Dec. 29, 2002]. The exhibition was accompanied by a 92-page catalogue that includes essays by Dervaux, Sigmund Abeles, Matthew Baigell and John Updike.

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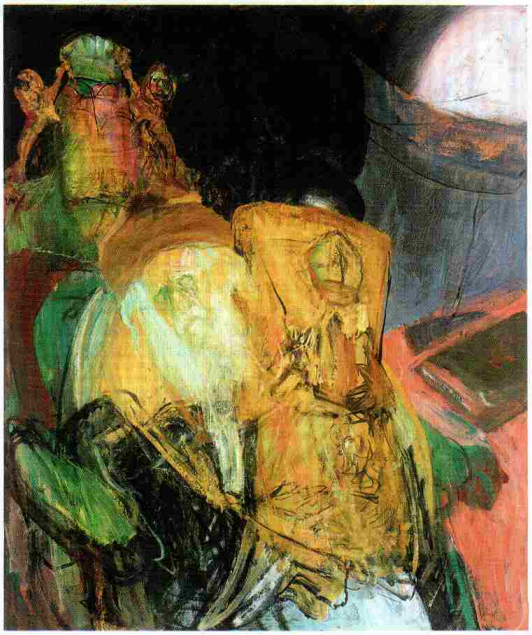
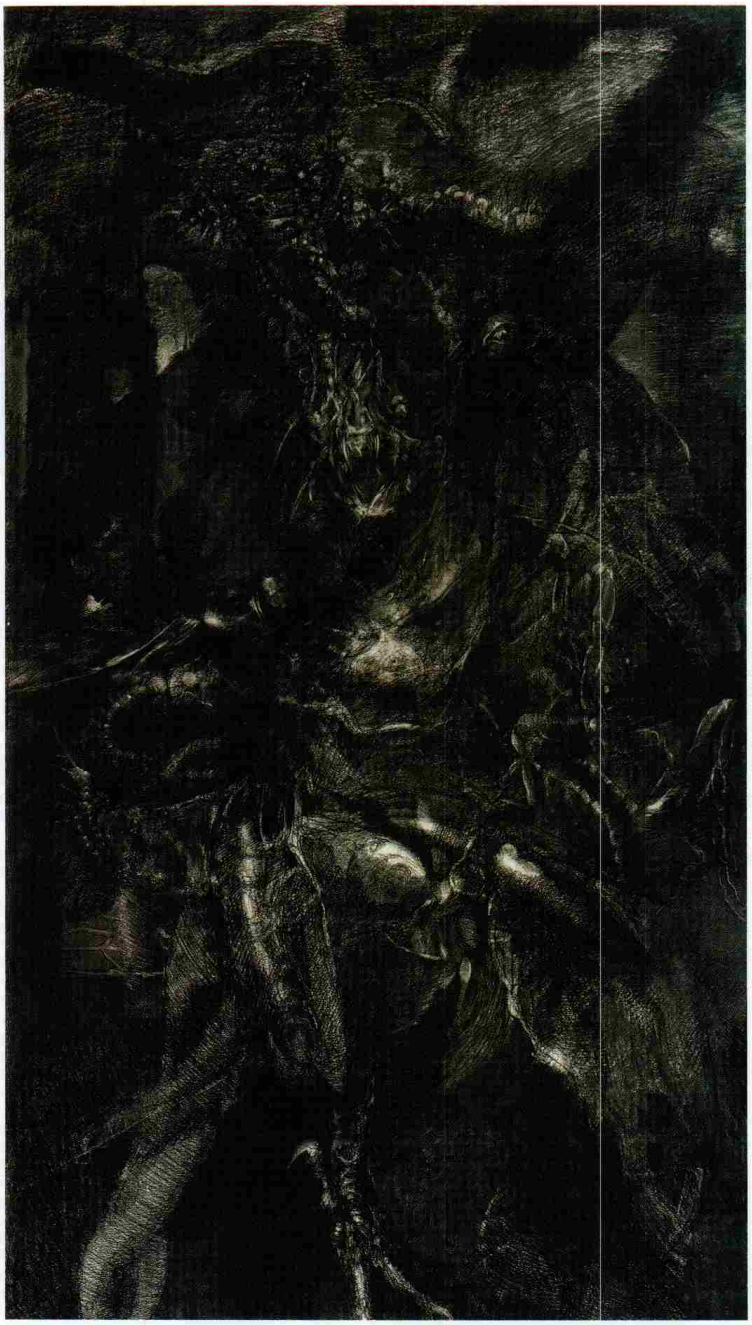


Rabbi with Torah, ***1999, oil on canvas, 48 by 40 inches. Collection of the artist.***



On the Astral Plane: Cold Anger, *1966, charcoal on paper, 66 by 37¼ inches. Collection Daniel Freedberg and Sunshine Lucas.*