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ART REVIEW; A Loner's Adventures in Spirituality

By HOLLAND COTTER NOV. 29, 2002

"Color and Ecstasy: The Art of Hyman Bloom" is the first of what the National Academy of Design Museum has announced as a series of shows "celebrating the artistic achievement of once renowned artists whose careers have fallen into relative obscurity." Mr. Bloom, almost 90, is a deserving choice, and he gets the project off to a bracingly idiosyncratic start.

In the years around World War II, his was a name to reckon with. Dorothy Miller chose him for one of her showcases of American talent at the Museum of Modern Art. His paintings appeared at the Whitney Museum and the Tate in London. In 1950 he represented the United States at the Venice Biennale, along with Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, who declared him "the first Abstract Expressionist."

ARTnews did a Hyman Bloom profile that year. Harvard asked him to teach. (John Updike, one of his undergraduate students, contributed to the National Academy catalog.)

But at the point when a more career-savvy artist might have been trying to consolidate his gains in New York, Mr. Bloom kept clear of the limelight. He stayed in Boston, the city he had come to in 1920 as the child of immigrants from Latvia and Lithuania, and New England is still his home.

He has led an interesting life there. He first studied art in settlement houses, then with Denman Waldo Ross (1853-1935), a painter, collector and Harvard professor who gave superb examples of South Asian sculpture to the Museum of Fine

Art. Mr. Bloom, a multiculturalist by temperament, became a devotee of both Indian classical music (he helped start a foundation to record and preserve it) and the Jewish liturgical singing familiar from his childhood.
From an early point he was spiritually adventurous. He investigated Rosicrucianism, Theosophy and Vedanta and, in an honored 19th-century Boston tradition, attended séances. (He never actually saw spirits, but he painted them anyway.)

In 1954 he took LSD, a heaven-and-hell experience that seems to have shaped his already hallucinatory art. He also repeatedly spent time in hospital autopsy rooms, which, judging from the work that emerged from these visits, had a depth-charge impact on his psyche.

Although city-based, he spent increasing amounts of time in rural Maine. The sensational drawings of forests that emerged from his stays are like psychedelic visions of Walden and link him directly to a European Romantic landscape tradition. Indeed, the artists he cared about most were all Old World figures: Blake, Rembrandt, Goya, Soutine, Matthias Grünewald, Rodolphe Bresdin, Odilon Redon, filtered through an atmosphere of mid-20th-century Expressionism and Surrealism.

While immersed in his New England life, however, Mr. Bloom was being forgotten elsewhere. His images of corpses, ghosts and haunted woods were repellent to art-as-a-comfy-armchair modernist tastes. Despite de Kooning's claim for him as an AbEx pioneer, the New York establishment lost interest in him when he didn't convert to full abstraction.

With the arrival of Pop, American art itself changed, and Mr. Bloom assumed the loner status he had really always had, but now with dwindling visibility.

All of which makes the National Academy show a welcome event. Organized by Isabelle Dervaux, curator of modern and contemporary art, it gathers more than 60 of Mr. Bloom's slowly executed, labor-intensive paintings and drawings for a modest-size sweep of a career that has extended well over half a century.

Among the earliest pieces are his remarkable pictures on Jewish themes from the 1940's; their richly colored, pigment-encrusted images of praying rabbis, veiled brides and synagogue chandeliers seem to glow in the dark. Some of them overlapped in time with his first autopsy paintings. These are probably the most jarring and difficult works he ever produced, though they were catalysts for the rest of his art.

In them the demure bride is replaced by nearly life-size corpses, lying nude on a table and awaiting the pathologist's knife. The complex palette, which in one context conveyed a sense of bejewelled material splendor, in another context suggests the bruised opalescence of bodily decay. When Mr. Bloom included autopsy paintings in his first Manhattan gallery solo in 1946, his dealer insisted that the most graphic of them be kept in a back room, out of public view. Then, as now, they were just too much.

But the artist kept doing the morgue pictures anyway, with increasing conceptual sophistication and a half-abstract, gestural fluidity that links them to other paintings with different subjects. The slit-open body in the "The Hull," for example, closely resembles the still life in "Rocks and Autumn Leaves." The rose-colored fabric of tattered flesh and muscle in "The Anatomist" is echoed in the ectoplasmic figures of Mr. Bloom's "Séance" series, in the sinewy tangles of his forest landscapes and in the skeletal patterns of mutually devouring fish that make up his "Seascape" series of the 1970's.

In short, nearly all of his work is bound together by a single theme or rather is fueled by a single dynamic: an obsession with the fact of physical mortality transformed into a mood of spiritual delirium. Whether you call the art that results visionary, morbid or just plain weird, there is no question of its moral seriousness.

It's a kind of seriousness -- confrontational, elaborately aesthetic, almost unguardedly personal -- that would seem to have little cachet at present, though Mr. Bloom's work finds interesting points of contact with certain aspects of contemporary art.

I'm thinking of Kiki Smith's sculptural dissections of the human body and of Peter Hujar's unforgettable 1970's photographs of mummified corpses and New York underground celebrities in the series "Portraits in Life and Death" now on view in a great show at Matthew Marks.

Damien Hirst's sharks and Ron Mueck's "Dead Dad" fit in here somewhere, along with much AIDS-related art from the 1990's. So in an overtly spiritualizing way do Alex Grey's X-ray-style paintings of birth, sex and death at Tibet House. (Mr. Grey and Mr. Bloom appear together in the exhibition "Painting in Boston: 1950-2000" at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Garden in Lincoln, Mass., through Feb. 23.)

Does this mean that Mr. Bloom is finally ripe for induction into the art-world mainstream, a position he briefly assumed, then retreated from half a century ago? I suspect not. He belongs to another stream, of artists too individualistic, hermetic or beyond identifiable fashion for easy marketing or quick understanding. The currents of this stream, still little navigated by art historians, can have surprising force, as this exhibition suggests and the National Academy's admirable career-recovery project may further reveal.

''Color and Ecstasy: The Art of Hyman Bloom'' remains at the National Academy of Design Museum, 1083 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street, (212)369-4880, through Dec. 29.

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