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In the Company of an Ecstatic: Hyman Bloom in Boston

by David Carbone

Hyman Bloom: Matters of Life and Death at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,

July 13, 2019 to February 23, 2020

Avenue of the Arts

465 Huntington Avenue

Boston, Massachusetts 02115



Hyman Bloom, *The Harpies*, 1947 © Stella Bloom Trust, Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

This thematic selection from the work of Hyman Bloom, subtitled *Matters of Life and Death* at The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, focuses on some of the artist's most controversial works, his deeply disturbing studies of human corpses and medical cadavers, contextualizing them with other subjects to flesh out his spiritual investigation into the mystery of being.

The work on view is mostly from the 1940s and '50s, the period of his early fame following his highly successful representation in the Museum of Modern Art 1942 exhibition, *Americans 1942*. Bloom went on to represent the United States at the 1950 Venice Biennale along with John Marin, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Both his 1954 and 1968 traveling retrospectives came to the Whitney Museum. But after the first retrospective, he withdrew from showing new work in New York until 1971. Bloom was always more committed to his art than to his career, which he actually considered a distraction.

Interest in mysticism was rooted in his orthodox Jewish upbringing. As he drifted toward a secular life, his life-long interest in the mysteries of the soul led him to the writings of P.D. Ouspensky and Helena P. Blavatsky—a similar trajectory to the paths to the absolute of Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, despite Bloom's preference for the figurative idiom. Through readings of ancient texts, Bloom went on to explore eastern religions, psychic research, philosophy, psychoanalysis, LSD, and Chassidic mysticism.

During the late fall of 1939 Bloom had the first of what he came to consider two transcendental experiences. "I had a conviction of immortality, of being part of something permanent and ever changing, of metamorphosis as the nature of being. Everything was intensely beautiful, and I had a sense of love for life that was greater than I ever had before." Although reluctant to make statements about his work, his remarks about these events speak to the heart of his artistic vision.

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Hyman Bloom, *The Bride*, 1941. The Museum of Modern Art, New York © Stella Bloom Trust, Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Entering the exhibition, we are confronted by a triptych-like display of a life-sized flayed figure seen from behind, *Self-Portrait* (1948), flanked by two equally large charcoal drawings of dead trees (both 1962), one dark and the other light. In the painting, what could have been a gruesome depiction of flesh, muscle and bone is, rather, in Bloom's thick and feathery strokes of saturated color transformed into a flaming apparition. Stepping back to compare the three works, one notices that the bare spiky limbed tree trunks echo the central figure's spine. Going in closer, we see the bony branches begin to transform into other living things. This is curator Erica E. Hirshler's key to the show: Bloom moves from the phenomenal subject, transforming the language of its description to reveal an otherwise invisible essence: the spirit in the body; new life regenerating from the dead, a continual metamorphosis.

Christmas Tree (1944), in the next room, evokes a child-like fascination with the light from reflective glass ornaments and candle lights. Painted under the rhythmic and gestural spell of Soutine, the tree is pressed into the picture surface, its golden hue occupying the space between the canvas and the viewer five or six years before Mark Rothko would use the same co-extensive spatial idea. As I gazed into the work, I suddenly became aware that the tree had taken on another identity: It had become the burning bush, a pictorial depiction of the voice of God.

Similarly, elsewhere in the exhibition, we encounter the large *Chandelier No. 2* (1945), framed by the golden walls of a synagogue, its molding, lined in red and green, shaping the chandelier into a double image by suggesting the shoulders and torso of a figure. Studying the glass crystals, we see that the top of the fixture becomes a skeletal head — another numinous presence—with eyes staring out at us. Such an Arcimboldo-like double image would also be found in works by Jean Dubuffet and de Kooning later in the decade.

The Bride (1941) is at once a symbolist interpretation of Jewish marriage motifs and a personification of the Sabbath. Ambiguously hovering between life and death, the female figure cloaked in a luminous veil strewn with iridescent flowers is a mysterious sign of transformation. Rising above pictorial antecedents in Redon and Chagall, Bloom's painting exudes a power all its own. Standing before these early works I realized that I was in the company of an ecstatic.



Hyman Bloom, *Female Corpse (Back View)*, 1947. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

A few years later, *The Bride* and its less compelling sister of the same title from 1943-45 would prove to be the source of some of his most disturbing but empathetic works: *Corpse of Man*, (1944); *Female Corpse, Front View*, (1945); and *Female Corpse, Back View*, (1947). All three figures are life size or nearly so, lying in eerily luminous shrouds unfurled on a table or slab but presented vertically like icons. The gruesome decomposition of the bodies, their bloated bellies and iridescent bacterial growths are ultimately transfigured by Bloom into jewel-like incrustations. In *Corpse of Man*, an everyman, the pushed-up shift covering his neck and shoulders is suggestive of a sacred mantle or prayer shawl. The symbolic centrality of the corpse's exposed, bloated genitals can be read as another emblem, of new life after death perhaps, for the soul. As we contemplate the richly painted body, light from behind seems to permeate the figure with ineffable immanence.

We sense the woman's soul still present in *Female Corpse*, her head tilted upward, as if, in a moment, she might come back to life. *Female Corpse, Back View* is more remote as the figure is turned away from us. Her back and legs glow with a multi-hued pearlescent luster suggesting the sort of magical topologies employed by Dubuffet in the following decade.

The swirling shroud seems to open a path for the soul's journey after death. Bloom's paintings allow us to move past a horror of death and observe the sacred mystery taking place, without any loss of death's harrowing nature. Here, as before, color is central to his expression of awe and wonder.

As if in need of release from confronting death so forcefully, Bloom began to shift from the human body to the earth, and from the soul to cultural memory in a series evoking rediscoveries of the distant past. *Archaeological Treasure* (1945), the first map-space evokes a medical cross-section of a spine and womb-like space but filled with ancient amphorae. *Treasure Map* (1945) details the excavation of a Neolithic Greek settlement at Dimini. *Buried Treasure* (1947) has a treasure site guarded by a specter who looks out at us, another double image. And *The Stone* (1947) returns us directly to Bloom's animistic belief in the soul being manifest in everything, even a stone, which may also be a cosmic eye. Each of these works are broodingly beautiful, radiating inner color-emotions. Looking at them I had no desire to walk on. (Unfortunately, these works are hung in a gallery which is annoyingly underlit, as if they needed theatrical help from a lighting designer). These complexly textured, gestural, and all-over compositions parallel the formal ideas of postwar European artists Wols, Dubuffet, and Jean Fautrier, as well as de Kooning and Pollock who saw Bloom as the first Abstract Expressionist when they first encountered his work at MOMA in 1942—an appellation he would come to refuse.

Nevertheless, Bloom's harrowing 1947 mythological picture, *The Harpies* comes closest to Pollock's dithyrambic drip painting, *Number 10*, (1949) hanging in the museum a few galleries away. At first, we see a thickly painted inchoate web of black shapes swarm over and under an equally shapeless red mass of barely discernible human flesh. The blue-

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Hyman Bloom, *The Anatomist*, 1953. Whitney Museum of American Art © Stella Bloom Trust, Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

black forms become harpies, the whole scene suspended in air: everything is rising and falling in a demonic feeding frenzy: a nightmare on the Astral plane. This painting seems to have led Bloom to his flayed cadavers in the years immediately following.

Within another preciously darkened gallery, four of the medical cadaver paintings are displayed along with three monumental drawings. The vehemence of their initial impact immediately calls up a comparison with Francis Bacon's use of the same imagery, (*Slaughtered Animal*, 1953), but for Bacon there is no transcendence—we are all just meat. As I tried to make sense of Bloom's liquid, nacreous bodies, I had to fight off the comparison with Bacon.

Refocusing on the iridescent polychromatic flesh, (*Cadaver on a Table*, 1953), I realized that Bloom, who loved and collected butterflies, had made an analogy between the death of the body and the emergence of the soul with the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly or moth, which are traditional symbols of the soul. This certainly fits with Bloom's belief in the immortality of the soul.

By contrast, the drawings are rendered as powerful tragic forms in red Conté crayon and maintain a sense of the deceased as a person, with their head thrown back or to the side, after the manner of martyrs depicted in Baroque paintings. An exception to this is *Autopsy* (1953), where the focus is on the hands of the medical examiner. The drawing accompanies its famous painted variant, *The Anatomist* (1953), in the adjacent room.

For me, these works are the core of Hirschler's argument for Bloom's importance and the best of the works are truly compelling. They demonstrate Bloom's currency with the most advanced pictorial ideas of mid-century. It took courage, perseverance and a great depth of spiritual feeling to produce these works, which live in us by the emotions they communicate. As I left this exhibition I was filled, with a sense of doubt that a true history of American art of the last seventy years has been written.

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