

Art review: Falmouth gallery shows modernism masters, mostly

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By Jorge S. Arango

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A title like “Maine Masters of Modernism” – as the show at Elizabeth Moss Galleries in Falmouth (through Aug. 20) is called – sets up some pretty high expectations. It implies artists at the zenith of their talents doing something revolutionary, iconoclastic and/or at a level of awe-inspiring proficiency and technique. Does “Maine Masters” deliver on that promise? Mostly yes, and sometimes no.

A good number of works assertively present an excellent, convincing case for the title. Among these are Lynne Mapp Drexler’s “Blue Peninsula,” David Driskell’s “Sunset Island Freeport” and several paintings by Robert S. Neuman.

WHAT: “Maine Masters of Modernism”

WHERE: Moss Galleries, 251 Route 1, Falmouth

WHEN: Through Aug. 20

HOURS: Monday by appointment, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-781-2620, elizabethmossgalleries.com

Drexler’s large 1971 oil on canvas, which seizes your attention from its position on a terra cotta-colored wall opposite the front door, was painted at a critical turning point in her career. That year she and her husband, fellow painter John Hultberg, purchased a house on Monhegan Island, where they escaped from New York each summer and where, eventually, Drexler lived year-round until her death.

Up to then, her work was largely abstract, and “Blue Peninsula” is certainly that. Drexler’s abstraction, however, was completely original, unlike anyone else’s. She would eventually be associated with the Pattern & Decoration movement of the mid-1970s and early 1980s, which took inspiration from so-called “feminine” and “decorative” sources such as Moorish, Byzantine and Far Eastern wallpapers and textile patterns, though one could also argue an affinity with Gustav Klimt’s pattern-filled canvases.

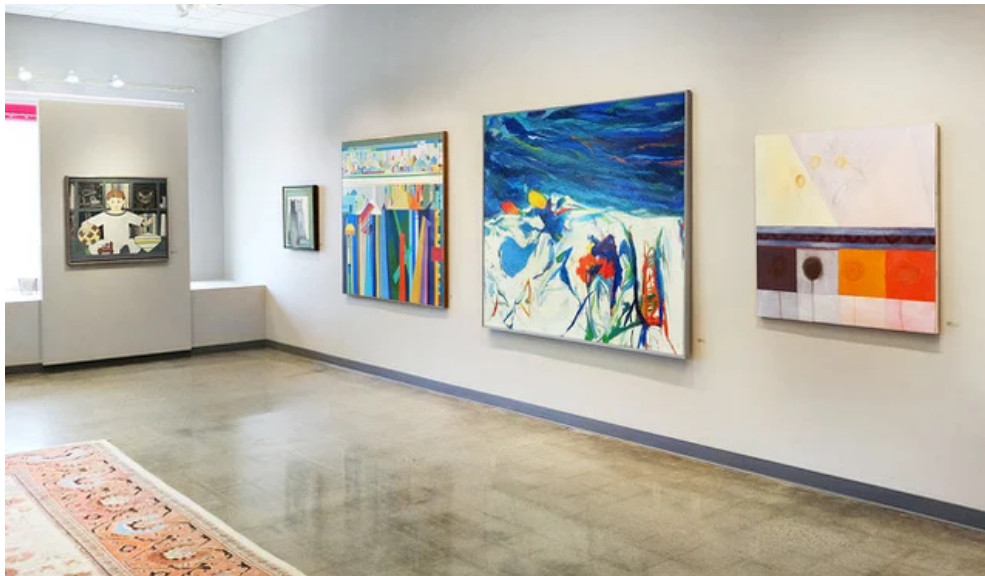
It is a hypnotic tour-de-force of color, ovoid shapes and wavy lines, and you can’t take your eyes off it. But the wavy lines (as well as the title) also presage a stylistic shift toward the synthesis of abstraction and representation that would define her later work. By her death in 1999, her paintings would clearly, if still abstractly, suggest the art colony’s woods, shoreline and people.



David Driskell, “Sunset Island,” Freeport, 1981.

David Driskell, currently the subject of [a magnificent retrospective](#) at the Portland Museum of Art, was famous for his depictions of pine trees. If there was any question that Driskell was a Maine master of modernism, the PMA’s exhibition definitively puts it to rest. “Sunset Island,” with its skillful layering of color and otherworldly spirituality, is certainly a very fine specimen of this work.

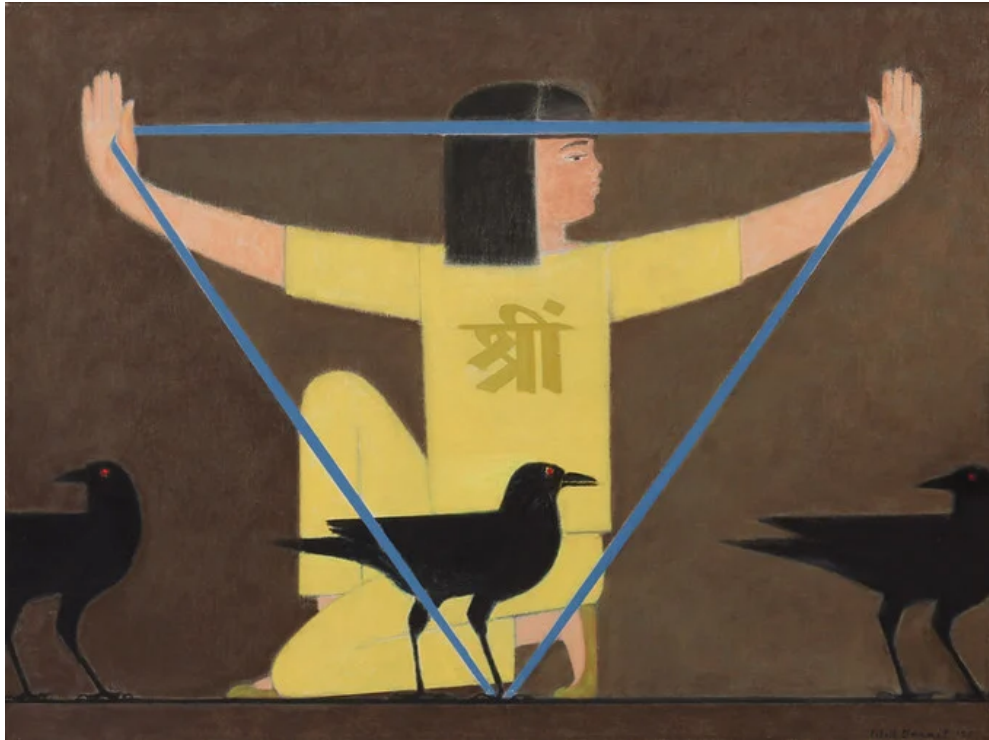
Neuman's pieces turn out to be a revelation. A native Idahoan of Swedish and German extraction who studied with, among others, German Expressionists Max Beckmann and Willi Baumeister, he was influenced by a diverse panoply of fellow artists. These included many he encountered during his peripatetic life: California modernists such as Richard Diebenkorn, Spanish painter Antoni Tàpies and Italian artist Alberto Burri, to name a few. But his color sense and some of his symbolist compositions also have apparent ties to Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee.



Robert S. Neuman's "Mirage", center left, and "Winter Storm Schoodic," center right," at Elizabeth Moss Galleries.

Not surprisingly, the seven works on display, executed between 1961 and 2007, cover a lot of ground. Moss has juxtaposed "Mirage" (1977) and "Winter Storm Schoodic" (2001). The only consistencies between them are their bright Pop color palette and largeness of scale. Otherwise, "Mirage" is analytical, almost mathematical in its calculation and its carefully calibrated assembly of geometric forms. In this sense, it's like Klee, but far more rigorous. But by the time Neuman approached "Schoodic," the wildness of Maine's coast had driven him to ebullient, almost feral abstraction.

Another fascinating pairing is Neuman's "Homage to Stravinsky" (1971) and "Lame Deer Study" (2002). The former is all geometry – mostly circles and half circles – but composed like Kandinsky's theoretical Bauhaus-period works to recreate the dynamic musical movement of a Stravinsky symphony. Conversely, "Lame Deer" was a series that came about after a visit to a Native American reservation in Montana. Teepee shapes, rendered almost like primitive petroglyphs, are not hard to discern. But they float through abstract fields of thin, splotchy color that offer them no ground to land upon – apparently a political reference to the injustices European white men perpetrated on them, forcing Native Americans to be what he called "people continually in flight."



Will Barnet, "The Crows I," 1996

That is the greatest joy of "Maine Masters" – seeing how artists developed and morphed over time, while retaining signature sensibilities. Will Barnet begins with geometric abstraction in "Untitled, 1954-1959" and proceeds to the flat-planed representational images of people, cats and crows with which we most associate him ("The Crows I" from 1996, a picture of his granddaughter, is particularly emblematic). But we see that he never lost his adherence to grids, triangles, circles and rectangles as underlying organizational structures of his compositions.

Stephen Pace is represented by three undated works that toggle between the Abstract Expressionism he absorbed from his teacher Hans Hofmann and the figural works of rural life whose style reveals the influence of his friend Milton Avery. A painting like "Jerusalem Artichokes" seems to walk a thin line between abstraction and representation. The through-line here is a love of pure, undiluted pigment.



Stephen Pace, "Jerusalem Artichokes"

All of these works live up to the title in one way or another. As do a pair of etchings by John Marin and Henry Kallem's "28th Street Bottles" (though his "Psychedelic Raft Monhegan Island," while certainly iconoclastic, is less interesting).

But there are some puzzling inclusions. Geraldine Tam's "Rosa Rugosa" and "Lupines" are certainly lovely and masterful in their representation of these plant forms. Yet it is hard to discern from the accuracy of her botanical reportage what makes them modernist. If anything, they are even more meticulously precise and unromanticized than those of Pierre-Joseph Redouté, the painter and botanist whose patron, Empress Joséphine de Beauharnais, named him her official artist.

The same goes for Charles Woodbury's "Looking South from Perkins Cove" (1910). Though his work was certainly expressive in a way that was less academic, Woodbury was essentially a painter of impressionistic marine scenes. It feels like a little bit of a stretch to call his art modernism. It's sort of like calling J.M.W. Turner or Winslow Homer, as forward-thinking as they were for their time, modern masters. We can only do this if we broaden that term in a way that seems at odds with fact. This does not in the least minimize the beauty of the painting, which is quite moving.

There are also a few works that are simply uninteresting and whose winnowing might have made a more consistently powerful impact on the viewer. But this is a minor quibble. Overall, the exhibition proves yet again that Maine was a significant locus of artistic ferment in America.

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Geraldine Tam, "Lupines"