

**NEW BRITAIN** — Contrary to the beliefs of the East Coast art establishment, there are actually exciting things happening in other parts of the country outside of the art mainstream. Never one to go along with contemporary trends, the state of California, for example, has always had a mind of its own when it comes to art.

So too, it appears, have New Haven residents Joanne and William Rees, who for the last 20 years or so, have been avidly collecting contemporary art by California artists, in particular those from Northern California who first made their marks on the scene during the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

The New Britain Museum of American Art, long known for its collection of classic American art, appears to have joined the march to a different drummer. Encouraged perhaps by the beautiful renovation in 2006 that doubled the museum's size and includes a great new gallery space for contemporary art, or due to its introduction to the Rees collection, perhaps a combination of both, it has been inspired to mount the very contemporary, and, one might say, very risky for this Connecticut establishment, "California in Connecticut: The Joanne and William Rees Collection."

Notes Museum Director Douglas Hyland, "For us this is a departure — a healthy departure. We've always been so Connecticut-centric in what we do here. This is our first dip into the pool of the great American experience."

Dip? Hardly. To call it a dip is an understatement. This is nothing less than a full-body dive. It's also great fun.

Over the last 35 years, the Reeses have acquired 190 works by talented artists living and working in the San Francisco Bay area. The eclectic collection includes examples of what has been

variously described as "California Funk" or "Bad Painting" — art forms that usually focus on humor, satire, absurdity, that are often figurative and use high color to express emotionally filled narratives.

Unaffected by artifice or trend, these artists, living and working in the mecca of social upheaval, the cultural revolution and all sorts of anti-establishment sentiment, did their own thing, as it were, questioning accepted standards and creating a distinctive new awareness and originality.

The exhibit is terrific, both in content and installation. It brings together 65 pieces by 32 artists of diverse style and content, putting forth a broad definition of the California narrative, ranging from the lyrical, soundless, almost dreamlike pieces by Irving Marcus (b. 1929) to the intellectually challenging and enigmatic experiments of William T. Wiley (b. 1937), to the hot and electric images that seethe with energy by Joan Brown (1938-1990) and Roy De Forest (b. 1930).

The installation, too, is smartly designed.

Notes Hyland, "The selection was very difficult. In the end we chose to see the evolution of an artist. We don't have one example of the artist. Rather we decided to have four or five."

Smart move. As a result, what could easily have turned into sensory overload becomes one of harmony, the individual pieces accommodated within a contained space of palpable compatibility where one can easily understand that the same individuals collected all these works.

When asked why they were interested in these California artists, William summed it up this way: "I respond to its nearly universal vibrant

color. ... Color is joyful to me. Also, many California artists drew exquisite figures, to which I relate. Finally, they are masters of satire. ... For me, painting and sculpture seemed devoid of this quality until these Californians put it in. And why should it not be there?"

Some of the most outstanding works are by Peter Vandenburg (b. 1935), represented by a wonderful group of sculptural pieces. "Woman with a Smile," and "Man with a Hat," for instance, possess a charming presence that achieves a perfect blend of quirky contemporary reverence and a formal sense of archaic form and color, resulting in a fine dialogue among person, place and time.

In two huge paintings, "At the Beach," by Brown and "Summer at the Seaside" by DeForest, both artists combine figuration with fantasy to convey an unabashed sense of primal delight and palpable disquietude. The high chromatic effect and the lively texture, seem to act as tension releases for subtexts of ambiguous narrative that is at once whimsical and threatening.

Lance Richbourg (b. 1938) is a good painter who approaches his art from a basically realistic viewpoint. In "Hank Aaron," a ballpark image in which a sign painter covers the outfield wall with a painting of the ballplayer, the imagery seems to leap from the wall, the viewer feeling as if she has just happened upon the narrative, Richbourg achieving a painterly essay that combines the act of seeing the narrative with the act of painting it.

Robert H. Colescott's (b. 1925) fine painting "Nouvelle Cuisine," a behind-the-scenes look at a trendy restaurant, investigates some of the conditions of our existence, creating a powerful sense of psychological dislocation and emotional unrest, his forceful palette and gestural brushwork revealing a story that is at once intimate in narrative and panoramic in its drama and thick atmosphere.

When asked about living with all this stuff, Joanne responds, "For me, it originally meant challenge; how to incorporate individual, eclectic, sometimes confrontational works in our physical lives; how to hang and display these often large, sometimes wild, and almost always unconventional works, harmoniously in a Colonial Revival house with traditional furnishings.

"... Gradually the challenge dissipated — and we are left with the gift of the effect on our lives; if collecting has any real value to the collector, it is what it brings to him or her; insight, beauty, joy, the elements that elevate the spirits and add to what we know about the world. And most of all, the specific benefits of California art; incongruity, quirkiness, those 'dappled things' that keep us from being bored."

Added William, "Only time will tell if this collection has significance, but I hope it has, and will make the work of this group of artists better known and appreciated in Connecticut and New York, and will encourage them to continue to extend our aesthetic edges."

One look at the exhibition clearly reinforces its significance. Many of these artists are big-time now. It also reinforces the fact that buying good works at affordable prices by good artists before their reputations become universal, is a good idea.

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