

ARTS IN REVIEW

ART REVIEW

Tutorial on an Underknown Painter

A small show elevates the profile of late-20th-century American realist Lennart Anderson



Lennart Anderson's 'Street Scene' (1961), left, and 'Portrait of Barbara S. (the First One)' (1972), below

heightened oranges, salmons, ochers, limes, roses and blues, it depicts the unfurling reactions to an accident involving a child and his broken toy wagon. Radiating summer heat, the painting recalls, in color, drama and organized chaos, Poussin's "The Abduction of the Sabine Women" (c. 1633-34), in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The injured boy and an attending woman (a pocket of calm) suggest a pieta; and a girl, her blond pigtailed flapping like angel's wings, surges into the scene like a superhero. The painting's numerous figures, as if suspended, begin to collide, freetail, tumble and topple, as if abandoned, midair, by a juggler.

For me, however, the most compelling pictures here are Anderson's still-life paintings, which unfold like dramatic narratives. In one, from 1993, the tiny, crinkly, gleaming aluminum-foil facets of a Jiffy Pop popcorn bag mesmerize, as does its torn opening—gaping like a hellmouth. In "Still Life With Mannequin (Admiration)" (1997), an artist's jointed, wooden studio mannequin gazes upward, toward a plaster bust fragment—perhaps an ancient Roman goddess arisen from her tomb. She leans out, toward us, as the reclining mannequin, like a fallen warrior, leans in. Their gazes, like ships passing, miss each other, a palpable emptiness in their wake. It's a humble, beautiful, melancholic picture, painted by "America's Chardin."

Lennart Anderson: A Retrospective
Lyme Academy of Fine Arts, through March 18

Mr. Esplund, the author of "The Art of Looking: How to Read Modern and Contemporary Art" (Basic Books), writes about art for the Journal.

By LANCE ESPLUND

The art critic Hilton Kramer called the late-20th-century American realist painter Lennart Anderson (1928-2015) a "Degas of our time." Another avid fan and a collector of Anderson's paintings refers to him as "America's Chardin." These French masters were undoubtedly important to Anderson, as were Roman frescoes, Piero della Francesca, Poussin, Ingres, Corot, Puvis de Chavannes and Balthus, as well as the psychologically charged portraits of Anderson's teacher Edwin Dickinson. The influence of these earlier painters, flashing here and there like familial traits throughout Anderson's oeuvre, shine through in "Lennart Anderson: A Retrospective," a handsome exhibition (curated by Amaya Gulpide and Jordan Sokol) of more than 30 oil paintings and drawings here at the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts.

Born in Detroit, Anderson stud-

ied at the Art Institute of Chicago, Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., and the Art Students League in New York. A painter's painter (and a professor at Brooklyn College, Columbia, Pratt, Princeton and Yale), Anderson is deeply admired yet relatively unknown beyond circles of artists. That's why it's entirely fitting yet somewhat

The exhibition, currently traveling to schools, deserves to be more widely seen.

disheartening that this show is making the rounds at colleges. It opened, in a very different, scruffier and more comprehensive configuration, at the New York Studio School, where Anderson also taught; and, in June, it travels to the Southern Utah Museum of Art at Southern Utah University. I'm thrilled to see that he is still inspiring student artists,

but this retrospective, the first since his death, should be much larger and headlining at major museums.

Anderson, extremely talented and idiosyncratic, explored a handful of idioms. His oeuvre was variable, messy, uneven. Besides the traditional genres of portrait, still life, landscape and interior, Anderson produced Bacchanals and Idylls—ambitious series of mythical landscape paintings with animals, gods, goddesses, bathers, dancers and nymphs. He depicted street scenes with accidents and, in 1951, a man falling from the sky, about to hit the pavement.

Lyme's retrospective, though cohesive in and of itself, does not offer a full range of Anderson's passions, fantasies and eccentricities. It primarily features Anderson's portraits—which make him appear more conventional and unimaginative than he actually was. Many here, extremely strong, express the immediacy, frontal presence and unique personalities found in early Roman Fayum mummy portraits. Most, such as "Morris Dorsky" (1990-91) and "Portrait of Jeanette" (1995), like Byzantine Madonnas,

explore the tension between a solid, fully realized head and its surrounding mostly flat and neutral-colored ground. "Portrait of Mrs. Suzy Peterson" (1959), reminiscent of Renaissance portraiture, is monumental, yet emits soft, milky light. In "Portrait of Barbara S. (the First One)" (1972), the sitter's eyes hover just above center, as if she is struggling to hold our gaze and to keep her head above water.

Also included at Lyme are a few nudes; a handful of wonderful still lifes; two small, striking, light-filled landscapes, "Patmos" (1959) and "Motecastello di Vibio" (1990), which summon Corot; and the large, multi-figure narrative painting "Street Scene" (1961). A rich array of warm,

