

arts wednesday

Blossoming of abstract artist Blanche Lazzell

By Cate McQuaid
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PROVINCETOWN — Blanche Lazzell was an early modernist who restlessly explored the tenets of abstraction, and a Provincetown habitué from 1915 until her death at 78 in 1956. In a sparkling exhibit here, the Berta Walker Gallery has several of Lazzell's works on paper on view.

They sport Lazzell's trademark rich tones and the off-kilter rotational composition that she picked up studying with cubist Albert Gleizes in Paris in the 1920s. It supports a tightly coiled tension, but also a sense of blossoming. In "Untitled (Abstract Study)" (1924) she deployed layers of flat, asymmetrical forms in a quickening gyre. The piece, made with milk paint, looks almost like a collage; Lazzell added polka dots and stripes to certain forms. Picasso and Georges Braque used scraps of newspapers and ads in their collages; Lazzell, in her collage-like paintings, referenced the patterns of domestic interiors.

She was a great proponent of the white-line woodblock print, developed around 1915. Rather than using several separately cut blocks to create a single print, white-line printers applied pigment to separate areas of a single block, working more like painters. It was the perfect technique to fit Lazzell's taste for flat, abstracted imagery and complex compositions. Her gorgeous print "Abstract Petunias" (1946) in shades of teal, gray, and wine, all at once spins, splays, and contracts.

It hangs beside "A Petunia" (1945), in gouache, in which dancing but mildly bumbling planes of color twist into a bloom, with softer edges than in the print. Lazzell's compositions are intentionally asymmetric, ramping up the push-pull tension that another of her teachers, Hans Hofmann, espoused. Her flowers aren't pretty; they hold conflict in their very forms.

There are two more solo shows up at Berta Walker: Paul Resika's floral still lifes pale beside Lazzell's fierce petunias. Resika is a consummate colorist, and I've savored his abstractions and landscape paintings, but there's something pat about his bouquets. While deftly made with fluttering brush strokes, they burst predictably from their vases, and look misplaced against abstract backgrounds.

Sculptor Romolo Del Deo puts a contemporary spin on classical forms. He mixes up bronze casts with dune sand and driftwood. Many of the works look like the shed skins of ancient Greek statuary, thin, torn, and catching dirt. "Sova" depicts an angel's face and ragged wings — more like those of a frail bat than an emissary of heaven. Half the face is torn away. The texture is gritty and scumbled with the artist's marks. In Del Deo's works, beauty erodes, but the erosion itself is captivating.

Photos come to light

Mona Dukess sticks with a subject, and cycles through a variety of techniques to properly capture it. "Mapped



From top: "Abstract Petunias" by Blanche Lazzell at Berta Walker Gallery, "Surfaces" by Mona Dukess at Provincetown Art Association and Museum, and "Elevation V" by Joerg Dressler at Alden Gallery.

Waters," her absorbing show at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, has her moving into digital photography. But at the center of the show is a vestige of her days as a handmade paper artist. "Shadows and Light" is three panels of fiberglass screen, used to strain

BLANCHE LAZZELL (1878-1956):
An American Modernist, Paris to Provincetown
PAUL RESIKA: Cape Flora and Fauna
ROMOLO DEL DEO: The Beauty of Time
At: Berta Walker Gallery, 308 Bradford St., Provincetown, through Aug. 21. 508-487-6411. www.bertwalkergallery.com

MONA DUKESS: Mapped Waters
At: Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 460 Commercial St., Provincetown, through Aug. 31. 508-487-1750. www.paam.org

JOERG DRESSLER: Elevations
CATHERINE MCCARTHY: Husbands and Wives
At: Alden Gallery, 423 Commercial St., Provincetown, through Sept. 1. 508-487-4230. www.aldengallery.com

paper pulp. Each features a three-by-three grid, with hieroglyphs referencing nature, drawn in gluey fabric paint. The screen panels flutter away from the wall, casting black shadows behind them.

Then, in "Surfaces," she layers digital images of those hieroglyphs on grids of photos of light on water. I've never seen anything quite like Dukess's approach to this subject matter. She blows up her photos of water, finding in the shadows a wealth of gestures. They speckle, twist, and accumulate nervously, echoing the ivory hieroglyphs she has placed on top.

In "Revelations," another triptych of enlarged images of water, this time mounted on aluminum, the shadows stretch, bat, and undulate like quivering ghosts. Stilled in photographs, they become gestural abstractions, and Dukess arrays all the wild lines and blots she captures into larger compositions. Even so, they dizzy with motion.

Abstract horizons

Over at Alden Gallery, Joerg Dressler paints abstracted landscapes that vibrate with color and mark-making. He stencils, scratches, cakes, and brushes. In the "Elevation" series, plain rectangles sit on the horizon line. In "Elevation V," luscious shades of teal sweep around a central pale rectangle, like a block of ice. Clouds coalesce above; below, it's deep black rippled with ribbons of green. He ramps up his aquatic hues, like those in "Fractals VI," with great, wave-like calligraphic swoops. Here, green light pours into a deep, blue-green chasm, and gestures tumble out like water displaced by a waterfall.

Catherine McCarthy's paintings, also at Alden, are no less operatic. McCarthy layers images and juicy, abstract strokes in "Husbands and Wives," a dark series that balances sunny images of mid-20th-century suburbia with painterly evocations, both abstract and representational, of underlying dread and hysteria. "Sirloin" features dagger men in business suits, and a great, dripping puddle of blue-black over which float images of a martini, an ash-tray, and four steaks, so thick and prime that they threaten with their abundance. Upending the "Leave It to Beaver" era is not new, but McCarthy's almost surreal emphases and dreamy layers make her work freshly devious.

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