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At RedLine, Denver artist Margaret Neumann's lifelong journey into a dark world.

Ray Mark Rinaldi / Nov 29, 2018

“What Lies Between” includes 30 paintings from one of Colorado’s most enduring and influential artists.

Margaret Neumann paints the things that can’t be seen. Dark dreams and random streams of consciousness. Murky memories. Illogical, interior narratives untethered to time or gravity

Where do these scenes exist — of spiders and crows, floating heads and disembodied breasts, tears and blood?

In her brain, or her sleep, or in her imagination? She couldn’t really tell you. But it is her talent to take this fluid stuff and contain it on canvas.

It’s daring to paint psychology this deep. People see it as self-portrait; they think you are insane. And for more than five decades now, people have thought all kinds of things about Margaret Neumann.

She doesn’t care. Not at all, and she’ll tell you so. Neumann owns whatever crazy lurks inside of her, and she respects it in others. She’s a trained social worker and has been counseling clients since the 1970s. In both her therapy and her art, crazy is just business.

“What Lies Between,” the retrospective of her work now at RedLine art center, pulls it all together. There are 30 paintings on display, starting with 1968’s “Barnyard” and running right up until “To The West,” which was created earlier this year. The show is meant as tribute to Neumann’s longevity, and to document her stature as a Colorado painter and her impact on other artists.



*Margaret Neumann at RedLine Art Center.
(Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)*

It doesn't hold back: "Neumann has achieved a near mythic stature, serving as mentor, teacher, guide and inspiration to countless artists," curator Simon Zalkind writes in the show's catalog

That's true, at least partly. Neumann is popular and admired in the art community. She's represented by prestigious Rule Gallery, and she's been around long enough to have influenced multiple generations.

She's part of Denver's old guard, having painted in the studio 40 years ago alongside regional icons like Clark Richert, Dale Chisman, John Fudge and John DeAndrea.

These days, she works out of Tank Studios, sharing space with the city's current crop of successful names, such as Ian Fisher, Joel Swanson, Laura Shill, Amber Cobb and Derrick Velasquez. In an art world where youth and newness are the highest values, Neumann remains, at age 76, at the center of things.

As the RedLine retrospective shows, the work is the key to her longevity. Stylistically, it is timeless. There

are hints of old-school surrealism and current pop psychology. She references traditional subject matter, like nudes and nature, but connects equally to current topic trends, like horror and sexuality. She's obsessed with surface as much as content, something very much on the minds of today's emerging painters.

And, ultimately, her riddles continue to leave us guessing. They're difficult to let go.

That's as true with 1968's "Desert Oasis Magic," with its off-kilter camels, sphinxes and palm trees, as it is with 2013's "The Swan," which awards an otherwise peaceful waterfowl with two heads. It all leaves you guessing.

At its best, it can be troubling, too.

"Kiki Cries," from 1984, depicts a nude female figure disappearing into a shroud of dripping, blood-red oil paint. "Push," from 2003, shows a male figure forcing one outstretched arm into a void of yellows and golds where a woman's face and breasts float above a mysterious surface.



Margaret Neumann's "To The West." (Provided by Rule Gallery)



Margaret Neumann's "Pink Swimmer."
(Provided by Rule Gallery)

"Pink Swimmer," from 2007, is divided into two sections. The lower half depicts a male silhouette in front of a fiery orange-red backdrop, reaching and staring upward toward the top half of the work, where a figure drawing of a similar male floats on his back in what might be a pink sky. The two halves of the acrylic painting want to connect, yet they can't.

In all of these pieces there is searching, longing, a lack of impulse control, a failure to find satisfaction.

There is also, at times, violence and terror, particularly in "Goya and Me," from 2006. As Zalkind points out in his catalog essay, the painting references Goya's bloody and horrific series of prints, titled "The Disasters of War," capturing torturous scenes of early 19th century political conflicts.

Neumann's take appears to update the awfulness to the Holocaust. She paints in oil an upside down figure, its head severed, in front of a field of blood red. Swirling in the muddled background are random shoes. Zalkind notes that shoes salvaged from Holocaust victims are one of the main attractions at museums commemorating the tragedy.

There is some background here that is relevant to the work — and perhaps to all of the enduring solemnness that marks Neumann's paintings. Her parents were Jewish and left Europe for the U.S. in the late 1930s as the German campaign against Jews was heating up. The Neumann family, and its relatives, were impacted in the most horrific of ways from the culminating events.

That trauma was an enduring and unhappy part of her childhood, Neumann says. She's a psychologist; she knows that sort of past is inescapable.

But her strength as an artist — her dare, really — is to let the art explore those issues rather than attempting to explain them in real dialogue, and to allow them to remain existential, unsolvable and unattractive.

Do the crows in her work symbolize death? Is all that red actually blood and do the spiders represent fear?

Neumann doesn't say. In fact, she insists she doesn't know the answer herself. Images enter her mind, she channels them to canvas. It is what it is — whatever it is.

"What Lies Between," a retrospective of paintings by Margaret Neumann, continues through Jan. 6 at RedLine, 2350 Arapahoe St. It's free. Info at 303-296-4448 or redlineart.org.