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DENVER Westword

Hippie Haven

By Michael Paglia, Thursday, July 13, 2006

"Western Theory 3," by Dale Chisman, oil on canvas.

Boulder came of age in the 1960s, right along with the first baby boomers. The beautiful little town became a national center for the counterculture and the New Left, creating social and political currents that flowed into the 1970s. The visual arts got caught up in the times, too, thanks to a bunch of art students -- and a professor or two -- at the University of Colorado who were suddenly stepping out as some of Colorado's most important artists.

The Singer Gallery, in the Mizel Center for Arts and Culture, is celebrating the accomplishments of some of them in The Armory Group: 40 Years. The show is absolutely fabulous -- as is standard for the Singer, thanks to the gallery's able director, Simon Zalkind. Despite a modest budget and an even more modest facility -- no bigger than the entryway of a McMansion -- Zalkind invariably pulls off spectacular exhibits, which is a fitting description of The Armory Group.

In the art world, the word 'armory' has a special resonance because of the famous Armory Show of 1913, which introduced the American public to modern art. Zalkind was thinking of this when he dubbed the Boulder artists in the show "the Armory Group." But in this case, "armory" also refers to the structure just north of the CU campus that once housed art studios. It was in this charming fieldstone building that these artists first came together.

Over the years, the definition of the group has, at times, expanded to include people who weren't at the Armory, and, at others, contracted to exclude some who were. The Singer show is clearly on the contraction end, as only the work of those who were at the Armory in 1964 is displayed

In spite of the fact that the connection between these artists was forged in the '60s, almost all of the pieces at the Singer are newer. It would have been interesting to have seen old work beside new, but Zalkind allowed the artists to self-select, and, like most artists, they chose to put out their newest stuff.

Because older works are few, the importance of the various artists is not readily apparent, though many were pioneers of various then-new trends in contemporary art. There are some stylistic commonalities among a cluster of the Armory artists, but most of them have nothing in common other than the fact that their paths crossed when they were young. Some were returning to figuration after a long period in which abstraction was seen as the only approach. Others were fully embracing abstraction. Some were getting hard-edged, springing off of minimalism into what could be called "maximalism," while others went soft-focus, embracing expressionism. You get the picture.

The Armory Group starts out with a pair of charming daubs by the late Esta Clevenger, "The Longmont Cow Auction" and "The Nun's Farm," both painted in 1999. Clevenger painted naively in these pieces, as though she were Grandma Moses with an MFA, which was an extremely hip thing to do at the time. Across from the Clevengers, on the angled wall that divides the Singer into sections, are a series of elegant Charles Di Julio pattern paintings on the left side, and two contemporary realist paintings by the late John Fudge on the right. The Di Julio selections include a gorgeous old untitled painting made up of colored dashes in an all-over crisscross plaid. There are also some newer and smaller panels that are revisionist essays on the same topic. The Fudge paintings are strange and have a decidedly surrealistic quality, even though they are crisp renderings of real things. Fudge was one of the most influential Colorado artists of the 1980s; by then, the rest of the art world had caught up with his sensibilities.

On a pedestal in front of the Fudges is a remarkable -- and eerily realistic -- painted bronze bust of a girl by John DeAndrea, one of the two internationally famous artists in the show. Behind the wall is an even more remarkable painted bronze by DeAndrea: "Dying Gaul," a full-figure study of a male nude in the throes of death, inspired by the famous statue of the same name from antiquity.

Zalkind hung a trio of Dale Chisman's "Western Theory" paintings as a backdrop to "Dying Gaul," creating the exhibit's most impressive passage. The "Western Theory" pieces are Chisman's latest neo-abstract-expressionist canvases, and though he's been honing his painterly skills for decades, they look remarkably fresh. Adjacent to the Chismans are two photo montages by George Woodman, who was a mentor to many of the artists included here. For that reason, I wish he'd been represented by his pattern paintings, which were so important to so many. To the right is a trio of Margaret Neumann's odd-ball narrative paintings, which look really good together. Zalkind once called Neumann "the godmother of the '80s new wave," and standing in front of a painting like "Bad Boys/Max and Morris," it's easy to see what he meant.

Around the corner, there's a group of Joe Clower watercolors that refer to comic strips, along with a group of geometric abstractions in oil stick on canvas by Jerry Johnson. Zalkind's been thinking a lot about underappreciated artists lately, and he puts Johnson in this category.

One of the obvious stars of The Armory Group is the legendary Clark Richert, who's represented by a classic work made up of tiny, meticulously done squares on a gray ground and a newer painting in which curvilinear elements have been added on a rich blue field. Closely related to these Richerts, at least conceptually, are the paper constructions by Richard Kallweit that take the form of polyhedrons covered in elaborate decorations. Completely unrelated to either the Richerts or the Kallweits are the neo-traditional landscapes by Susan Katz and the figural sculptures by Mike Reardon, installed nearby.

The show ends with a photo documentation of a performance arranged by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who is world-famous for her conceptual works. In this piece, "Snow Workers Ballet," Ukeles re-

created the story of Romeo and Juliet using front-end loaders painted different colors to distinguish one from another.
The Armory Group makes the perfect prequel to the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver's blockbuster Decades of Influence, though Zalkind didn't know that the MCA show was going to happen when he was putting his exhibit together. Once he found out, he felt that it was the wrong time and that he'd made a mistake, that the MCA extravaganza would make his effort look like a poor relation. But he's finally come around to realize what I did: It's the perfect show at the perfect time.

I can't recall a time when there was such a convergence of exhibits examining the region's past art. As I've pointed out during the last month or two, this summer provides Denver gallery-goers with a tremendous opportunity to take a big-picture look at local art history.

Sadly, it's already too late to take in Colorado & the West at David Cook Fine Art, which provided a snapshot of the first half of the twentieth century. If you missed it -- and especially if you didn't -- you'll want to take in Vavra Triptych at the Kirkland Museum of Fine and Decorative Arts. Organized by Kirkland director Hugh Grant, it's a show that looks at the work of Frank Vavra, who was a major artist in Denver from the '20s to the '60s, as well as surprisingly strong efforts by his wife, Kathleen Huffman Vavra, and his daughter, Diane Vavra.

A different look at the state's early- to mid-twentieth-century art is Colorado Modernism: 1930-1970, which opens Friday, July 14, at Foothills Art Center in Golden with a reception from 5:30 to 8 p.m. The show, guest-curated by contemporary artist Tracy Felix, explores the development of modernism in the state, beginning with the cubo-regionalism of the 1930s and winding up with the abstract expressionism of the '50s and '60s.

Then, of course, there's The Armory Group at the Mizel Center, which is reviewed above and segues perfectly into a plug for Decades of Influence: Colorado 1985 -- Present, at the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver, the Center for Visual Art, the Gates Sculpture Triangle and the Carol Keller Project Space. For this over-the-top multi-part show, MCA director Cydney Payton assembled a who's who of artists who collectively do a good job of sketching out the art currents of the past twenty years.

Now, I know a lot of you dawdled and put off seeing that David Cook show until it was too late. However, there's still plenty of time to see the others I've mentioned, as they all close in August or later. And if you don't get around to seeing them, don't blame me: I've done all I can.

Last week, I laid out an imaginary version of Cydney Payton's greatest triumph, Decades of Influence: Colorado 1985 -- Present. It was Payton herself who pointed out to me that I had left out one of our greatest ceramic artists, Maynard Tischler, of all people. Payton was right, and so, as a late entry, I'd include something by him, maybe one of his pop-y trucks. During the same conversation, Payton teased an upcoming show that's already in the planning stages. The working title is Decades Redux, for which she plans to take some of the artists in the actual show (as opposed to my mental one) and use them as a starting point to bring in others. There's no denying it: Payton has hit her stride.